

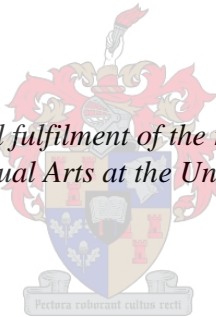
# **TURNING BACK:**

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## **CONTINUITY AND DIFFERENCE IN MODERNIST AND POSTMODERNIST REFLEXIVITY**

by  
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*Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
Masters of Arts in Visual Arts at the University of Stellenbosch*



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March 2010

## **Declaration**

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March 2010

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## ABSTRACT

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The primary function of paintings and novels in Western culture has historically been considered the depiction or description of reality. Over the course of the last century, however, the inherent reflexivity of both art and literature has become progressively more insistent and programmatic, in such a way as challenges the relationship between form and the world. A re-thinking of the role of representation is thus central to both modernism and postmodernism.

This thesis is an investigation into the relationship between modern and postmodern reflexivity. Through the close examination of four artists who serve as case studies, I argue that literary and artistic modernism's emphasis on form and subjectivity, as well as the tendency of postmodern art and writing to flaunt its own status as rhetoric/fiction, are different facets of a continuous response to a rapidly changing world. Using the insights of post-structuralist theory, I suggest that whereas modernism's reflexive drive is directed towards truth and self-knowledge, postmodern reflexivity is centrally concerned with the elusive, continually shifting nature of meaning. What emerges in the light of the practice of individual artist and authors, however, is that the modern and postmodern reflexive modes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can co-exist, producing a vital and necessary tension.

## OPSOMMING

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Beskrywing en uitbeelding van die werklikheid word geskiedkundig as die kernfunksies van skilderye en die roman in die Westerse kultuur beskou. Gedurende die laaste eeu het die inherente refleksiwiteit van beide kuns en letterkunde toenemend meer programmaties en sistematies geword. Dit het geskied op 'n wyse wat die verhouding tussen vorm en die wêreld uitdaag. 'n Herbesinning van die rol van uitbeelding of representasie is gevolglik van sentrale belang vir beide modernisme en postmodernisme.

Hierdie tesis is 'n ondersoek na die verwantskap tussen moderne en postmoderne refleksiwiteit. Deur 'n noukerige ondersoek van vier kunstenaars se werk, stel ek voor dat die letterkundige en artistieke klem van modernisme op vorm en subjektiwiteit, sowel as die gebruikelike kenmerk van retoriek/fiksie, verskillende aspekte ~~is~~ van 'n voortdurende weerkaatsing op 'n vinnig veranderende wêreld is. Deur die teoretiese perspektiewe van post-strukturalisme toe te pas, stel ek voor dat modernistiese refleksiwiteit neig na die waarheid en selfkennis, terwyl postmoderne refleksiwiteit fokus op die onbepaalde en veranderlike aard van betekenis. Nietemin, uit my kritiese beskouing van die kreatiewe praktyk van afsonderlike kunstenaars en skrywers blyk dit dat die modernistiese en postmodernistiese refleksiewe benaderinge nie noodwendig mekaar uitsluit nie, maar saam kan bestaan en 'n dinamiese en noodsaaklike spanning skep.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## **I. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY**

The word ‘reflexivity’, according to Robert Stam, derives from the Latin verb *reflectere*, which translates as “to bend back on” (1992:13). First used in the fields of philosophy and psychology, it “referred to the mind’s capacity to be both subject and object to itself within the cognitive process” (Stam 1992:13)<sup>1</sup>. Reflexivity in both visual art and literature can similarly be broadly imagined as the ability of an artwork or text to reflect back upon itself, in a way that foregrounds its fictitiousness, the materiality of the medium, and/or the process of its creation and reception. This self-referential process can be contrasted with the way in which a work refers to something outside of itself, as if each process were a pull in a different direction. If illusionism evokes what is not inherent in the medium itself, so that the thing described becomes present in the viewer or the reader’s mind, reflexivity is what chafes against that illusion by calling attention to its workings.

In my own painting, drawing and writing, I have been intrigued by the relationship between illusionism and reflexivity: between the desire to refer, with words or paint, to objects and situations in the world, and the desire to foreground the constructive or creative aspect of that referral. This tension can be seen as symptomatic of a current general skepticism about the ability of words and pictures to provide neutral and transparent access to a truth beyond themselves, a phenomenon that has come to be known as the “crisis in representation” (Lewis 2007:1). In many areas of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Today it is used in disciplines as diverse as anthropology, computer science and economics. In computer science, a system which receives feedback and self-corrects is referred to as ‘reflexive’ (Stam 1992: xiv). While the use of the term in computer science illustrates the backward bending implied by reflexivity, in the human sciences the word takes on an ethical dimension. In anthropology, for example, a reflexive researcher is one who is concerned to examine the impact of factors such as their own social, economic or ideological background, as well as dominant beliefs and practices within their discipline, on the framing and results of a study (Ruby 1980:154). Each of these fields of study integrate the term into their vocabulary slightly differently, but all retain something of the image of a thing bending backwards to examine itself – of consciousness grown conscious.



theory and creative practice, there is an overwhelming preoccupation with the way that representations not only *mediate*, but also actively *construct*, what we understand as reality<sup>2</sup>. There is also a desire to avoid a kind of “naïve realism” which, according to Thomas McEvelley’s discussion of postmodern painting in *The Exile’s Return*<sup>3</sup>, is only possible today as a “kind of dream, or hypnosis, or wishful thinking” (1993: 102).

As certain theorists point out (Hutcheon 1989; Stam 1992; Ommundsen 1993), reflexivity is not only present within postmodern or contemporary texts, but is in fact a perennial aspect of art – the inseparable companion of illusionism rather than its recently arrived foe. Reflexive moments can be found in Chaucer’s insertion of himself as a character into his *Canterbury Tales*, in Shakespeare’s embedded plays (*The Mousetrap* in *Hamlet*), as well as in Vermeer’s or Velasquez’s paintings of the artist at work. However, there are times when the desire to foreground what goes on ‘behind the scenes’ of writing or painting becomes a central focus. I will argue that both modernism and postmodernism are such times, and that there are significant continuities, as well as differences, between the contemporary emphasis on the textuality of art-works<sup>4</sup> and the early modernist focus on form and the internal, psychological self. Because I will argue that this attention to form does not necessarily exclude the awareness of the socio-political implications of art,

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2 The reflexive impulse to complicate or problematise referentiality can be seen not only in the visual arts, and contemporary fiction, but also in art and literature theory, as well as in fields as diverse as linguistics, psychoanalysis, cybercnetics, anthropology and history. It can also be discovered, as Grant Stirling points out, “in everything from North American television commercials for Sprite and Nike to episodes of Seinfeld and the Larry Sanders show” (2000: 17). Similarly, Stam cites the lyrics of certain rap and samba songs as reflexive, affirming that reflexivity is not limited to either ‘fine art’, or Western culture (1993: 13). In an episode of *The Simpsons*, Lisa tells Homer a story that involves many embedded stories (Jean 2006: 17/13). When Homer gets confused, Lisa uses the analogy of the play within the play to explain, but this literary reference is lost on Homer, so she rephrases it in more contemporary terms: “it’s like a home movie of you watching TV”. Entitled *The Seemingly Never-Ending Story* (a parody of Wolfgang Petersen’s 1982 film *The Never-Ending Story*, based on a book with the same title by Michael Ende), the hyperbolic use of embedded plots has a parodic function typical of postmodern reflexivity.

3 *The Exile’s Return* is a collection of essays that discuss the return of painting, and particularly of figurative painting, in the ‘postmodern era’. Although it was published fifteen years ago, its concerns are still relevant. The choice to work in a figurative way may no longer a contentious one, but the kind of ‘realistic’ painting practiced by artists today is frequently marked by self-conscious references to both the act and the history of painting.

4 By this I mean the way that a painting or novel is now understood as a product of discourse (whether that discourse is social, cultural, political, historical or ideological), that derives its meaning from the context of its production and consumption, as opposed being the creation of a unique individual, who imbues the work with a particular meaning that is stable and universal.

my thesis can in part be seen as a celebration and recuperation of certain aspects of modernist reflexivity and its attendant formal concerns.

## **II. REFLEXIVITY IN ART AND LITERATURE**

My decision to look at both visual art and literature in this thesis is motivated by two main factors. The first is a desire to recognise the way that both have impacted on my own interest in reflexivity. It was discussions of reflexivity in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in English Literature tutorial classes, for example, which provided a shape and a vocabulary for my thoughts about illusion and anti-illusion in painting. Studying modern poetry led me to become interested in the connections between modernism and postmodernism and encouraged me to see them as different facets of a continuous response to a changing world.

The second is an interest in drawing connections between the changes in thinking about representation in different media. There are some quite fascinating links between the development of both modern and postmodern literature and art. In terms of the artists I will be discussing, van Gogh was influenced by social-realist literature, from the novels of Émile Zola to those of George Eliot, while Virginia Woolf's encounter with the first post-impressionist exhibition in London in 1920 appears to have fuelled her desire for a literature that would tire its reader of the old forms of realism: would "do for literature" what Cezanne, Gauguin and van Gogh had "done for painting" (Woolf in Goldman 2000:112). In the work of Anselm Kiefer and Jonathan Safran Foer, there is an attempt from either side to bridge the gap between literature and art. This bridging can be seen in Kiefer's use of text in his paintings and his use of old books as the starting point for artworks, as well as in Foer's play with the visual aspects of his text, in his use of diagrams and his play with typography in *Everything is Illuminated*.<sup>5</sup>

Although these connections may seem rather idiosyncratic, or appear as the inevitable cross-pollination of artistic forms that coexist in the same cultural milieu, they are in fact

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<sup>5</sup> This play with the visual in the *Everything is Illuminated* is continued in his second novel *Extremely Close and Incredibly Loud* where he includes photographs and pictures in the book, not merely as illustration of events in the novel but as an alternate and parallel method of storytelling.

instances of an important broader shift that is connected to reflexivity in ways that are not perhaps readily apparent. It seems fair to say that the literature of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and T.S Eliot, for example, was influenced by the same concern with form as giving shape to the individual's experience of the world that animated the work of the impressionists and post-impressionists (the term literary-impressionism bearing this out) – a concern that I will argue is connected to certain postmodern reflexive strategies. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the relationship between art and literature (or, more accurately, literary theory, which has itself taken on a overtly literary dimension) is perhaps somewhat reversed. Although the discussion about representation that arose in continental philosophy has been applied by Anglo-American theorists to both literary and visual examples, the vocabulary of the debate is often language-orientated: artworks are 'read' as 'texts'; debates about authenticity center around 'authorship'; art students are encouraged to develop a 'visual language' rather than a 'style'. Stam links the prevalence of the current concern with reflexivity to this pervasive interest in language, commenting that "reflexive questions have become absolutely central in a period which systematically valorizes the category of language" (1992: xv).

Without denying that different media have different things to work with – different inflections, different concerns, and to an extent, different histories – I aim to juxtapose instances of reflexivity in visual art and in literature in order to indicate something of the breadth and inclusiveness of reflexivity as a cultural phenomenon.

### **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND EXPOSITION OF CONTENTS**

Although this thesis is to a large extent a comparative study of the differences and continuities of modern and postmodern reflexivity, I am not setting out to conduct a comprehensive survey of the different types or modes of reflexivity prevalent in or characteristic of these two time periods. Instead, I will engage in depth with the work of four individual artists, whose work highlights certain important aspects of reflexivity. I value such an engagement over a more comprehensive study for the following reason: reflexive tendencies found in specific works cannot be read *solely* as instances of more

general trends, and an in-depth consideration of particular texts allows one to look for surprises, inconsistencies and particularities that are sometimes overlooked in a more general discussion. Although I will argue that the visual and written texts I have chosen in some important respects are characteristic of modern or postmodern reflexivity, I will also try to bring out what I see these texts as sharing – the ways in which modern texts contain postmodern moments and postmodern texts contain echoes of modernist reflexivity – in an effort to locate current interest in reflexivity within some of the broader shifts in artistic practice and theory that have occurred over the last century.

The artists I have chosen to look at come from different historical, geographical, and cultural backgrounds, and work in different mediums. Vincent van Gogh made paintings in Holland and France in the late nineteenth century. Virginia Woolf wrote novels in England in the early twentieth century. Anselm Kiefer has been producing work across a range of media including painting, drawing, photography and installation since the 1970's, and his work is strongly informed by a particular German subjectivity. Jonathan Safran Foer published his first novel, which deals with the effects of the holocaust on second-generation survivors, in America in 2002. Although there are differences between these artists in terms of the context in which their work was produced, the range of subject matter they choose to focus on, and the particular way in which their work is reflexive, there are also significant points of contact. While the chapters on specific artists function as case-studies, they cannot exhaustively represent all the facets of modern or postmodern reflexivity. Taken together, however, they form a particularly complete picture of the treatment of two key aspects of reflexivity over the last century which has been of interest to me in my own practice: the reflexive play with the medium itself, and the device of including an artist-figure within the work. I have also focused on works where the tension between illusionism and these reflexive aspects is particularly evident or productive, and throughout this thesis I will argue that the results of this tension allow, rather than preclude, engagement with wider social issues.

My first chapter aims to contextualise my later discussion of individual artists by providing an overview of the debates surrounding reflexivity. It gives a clear indication

of what I understand the term ‘reflexivity’ to mean, and examines shifts in thinking about representation from the viewpoint of post-structuralist theory. Having unpacked the term ‘reflexivity’, I will explore these shifts in three arenas. Firstly I will look at the connection between reflexivity and subjectivity: at how thinking about representation relates to our self-understanding; next I explore the modernist concern with form and the self, which I will argue constitutes a form of reflexivity; and finally I will look in detail at some of the theorists that inform postmodern reflexivity. My discussion of both modernist and postmodernist reflexivity will situate these phenomena within the broader currents of modernity and postmodernity, outline their salient characteristics, and suggest differences and continuities between them.

The second chapter looks at the use of reflexivity in the work of Vincent van Gogh. Widely regarded as one of the one of the most prominent figures of artistic modernism, reflexivity is a central concern in his work, both in his use of medium and in his self-portraiture. The commitment to the subjective expression of ‘temperament’ evident in his work, as well as his extensive documentation of his artistic aims in his letters, make him a fascinating example of a particularly type of modernist reflexivity. This reflexivity is involved in the search, through increasing abstraction and self-referentiality, for a realism that acknowledges and expresses the subjectivity of its creator. Although the notion that an artwork unproblematically expresses the personality or ‘vision’ of its creator has been discredited by certain theorists (in *Recodings* Hal Forster (1985) calls this idea the “Expressive Fallacy”), I will argue that there are ways in which this focus on subjectivity, when seen as reacting against a nineteenth century Realism, in fact constitute a form of self-reflexivity. The first section will look at how van Gogh’s emphasis on the formal qualities of his medium constitute a particularly modern form of reflexivity. I will focus on both how these elements draw attention to the materiality of the medium and at how this focus on form is related to a search for universal truth. The second section will examine how his self portraiture, while both an example of a particularly modernist self-reflexivity where the focus on form becomes naturalised as the language of expression, nevertheless contains the elements that destabilises this very

idea. The final section of this chapter will draw connections between modernist formalism, expressionism and self-reflexivity in the work of van Gogh.

The third chapter will look at reflexivity in the writing of Virginia Woolf, whose work can be seen as developing and extending in literature the expanded realism sought by van Gogh in painting and drawing. This chapter will look in detail at reflexive elements in Woolf's writing, focusing primarily on *To the Lighthouse*, arguably the most explicitly self-referential of her texts, and focusing on both the ways in which reflexivity is present, and on the effects of this reflexivity. The first section examines reflexive instances in Woolf's narrative style, while the second section looks at how the character of the painter Lily Briscoe is used as a vehicle for the explicit statement of many of Woolf's artistic concerns. The third section develops this argument, exploring the role of reflexive elements, particularly the inclusion of Lily, in search for 'truth' and 'meaning' through artistic form that is undertaken in *To the Lighthouse* with an intensity comparable to van Gogh's, but accompanied by an amplified awareness of language's limited ability to either objectively describe reality *or* to express internal reality.

The fourth chapter will look at reflexivity in the work of Anselm Kiefer, whose practice, while echoing the tension between illusionism and reflexivity present in the work of Woolf and van Gogh (both of whom he acknowledges as influences), moves away from an attempt to mirror subjective reality towards an explicit engagement with communal themes and a more general meditation on the role of art. His reflexive strategies can be considered to be particularly postmodern, but his work retains the idea of art as a source of renewal or regeneration that accompanies the modernist concern with form and the self. The first section of this chapter will explore how Kiefer's work reflects on the role of art and the artist through an examination of his use of the symbol of the artist's palette and his own body. The second section explores how Kiefer's formal reflexive strategies challenge the self-sufficiency of modernist formalism to establish his art as a text irrevocably embedded in the world, which also becomes a text. This chapter will argue that Kiefer's work utilises postmodern reflexive strategies in order to reinvigorate the modernist concern with art's ability to create meaning.

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, discussed in the fifth chapter, displays many of the playful, whimsical, humorous reflexive techniques of postmodern metafiction. Concerned with the same events that Kiefer engages with, Foer dramatises the play between a realist commitment to veracity and a reflexive problematising of mimetic truth, through the creation of two distinct authorial perspectives which ultimately act to confirm and strengthen each other. This chapter is divided in three sections. The first two examine each of these perspectives in turn, showing how formal reflexive devices contribute to the character of each, while the third summarises their interaction, showing how Foer returns to an affirmation of the power of the imagination and the ability of art to impact on life.

Having examined the workings of reflexivity in the work of artists who have all, at some point or another, impacted on my own development as a painter and a writer, I will look briefly at examples of the work that I have produced for the practical component of my Master's degree.

# CHAPTER ONE:

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## FROM REALISM<sup>6</sup> TO REFLEXIVITY: THE AGE OF UPHEAVAL AND ITS THEORISTS

The whole curiosity of our thought now resides in the question: What is language, and how can we find a way round it in order to make it appear in itself, in all its plenitude? (Foucault 1966:306)

### 1.1: INTRODUCTION

Literary and artistic representation comes with a historical imperative to represent ‘life’, ‘reality’ or ‘the world’ (Lewis 2007: 2). Such representation involves three things: an artist/author, the form that the representation takes, and that which is represented. Reflexivity<sup>7</sup> involves a questioning of all three of these areas and the relationships between them. It foregrounds the role of the creator and problematises the relationship of form to its subject. Reflexivity can be seen as the evident awareness on the part of the creator that form is not adequate to the world, and this is inseparable from broader shifts in the way the world has been experienced.

The urge to explore explicitly this triangular relationship in art and literature is particularly evident in the last century, but manifests with different inflections in

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘realism’ has been regarded as a somewhat problematic term since at least the 1970’s. As Damien Grant notes, it comes to us today “weakened from loss of blood in earlier battles” (1970: 3). The mutivalency of this term is indicated, he points out, by its tendency to attract qualifying terms, (such as magic-realism, surrealism, psychological realism, social-realism), and the way it is sent out “handcuffed by inverted commas” (1970: 1,2). The multivalency of this term is indicative of different perceptions of what constitutes ‘reality’. Generally speaking however, the word ‘realism’ in art and literature refers to a style, which manifests differently at different times, that attempts to mirror or capture as closely as possible the artist/author’s understanding or perception of “reality”.

<sup>7</sup> Within visual and literary studies, the word ‘reflexivity’ is sometimes used synonymously with ‘self-referentiality’ or ‘self-reflexivity’, to refer to the ways in which a work foregrounds its authorship, the process by which it was formed, or its consumption or reception. However, these different terms can be used to illuminate different facets of reflexivity; ‘reflexivity’ here referring to this tendency in its broadest sense, while ‘self-referentiality’ and ‘self-reflexivity’ address instances where the text or artwork refers specifically to the idea of an authorial self behind the text, with self-reflexivity implying self-reference, but carrying the added connotations of contemplation that the proximity of ‘reflexive’ to ‘reflective’ (or ‘reflect’) encourages.



modernism and postmodernism.<sup>8</sup> Together with the rise of an increasingly explicit emphasis on reflexivity in artistic practice, a large and influential body of theory has been developed, which has provided a new lens through which the relationship between the subject, means of expression and world has been conceptualised. This theory is concerned with language as a mediator of ‘reality’, and was developed largely by French theorists including Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida.

Saussure’s inaugural insight, which impacted significantly on thinking about representational systems and aptly demonstrates what has come to be known as the linguistic turn, is succinctly put by Christopher Norris:

[Saussure] argued that our knowledge of the world is inextricably shaped and conditioned by the language that serves to represent it. ...Far from providing a ‘window’ on reality or (to vary the metaphor) a faithfully reflecting mirror, language brings with it a whole intricate network of established significations. In his view, our knowledge of things is insensibly structured by the systems of code and convention which alone enable us to classify and organise the chaotic flow of experience. There is simply no access to knowledge except by way of language and other, related orders of representation. (Norris 1991: 4)

The idea that language structures our idea of reality forms the basis of my understanding of reflexivity, in that I regard ‘reflexive’ texts as foregrounding this structuring process in various ways. This insight is developed in different directions by various writers, some of whose ideas I will address more fully in an examination of postmodern reflexivity later

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8 I understand both modernism and postmodernism as a collection of socio-cultural tendencies, grounded in, but not absolutely limited to, specific time periods. Although its origins are complex and disputed, for the purposes of this thesis I take modernism within the visual arts as beginning with the Impressionist’s use of rapid, loose brushwork to capture fleeting moments of contemporary life. Within literature, I regard modernism as beginning with the formal experimentation and psychological focus of the late-nineteenth, early twentieth century, as seen in the work of authors such as Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence and E.M. Forster. In this way, modernism in literature as well as visual arts is defined in part by their relationship to ‘realism’ or ‘naturalism’ in nineteenth century art and literature. Similarly, although postmodernism can be seen as much as a “selective intensification of tendencies within modernism” as a complete break or rift with modernism (Conner 1989:116), I see postmodernism as gaining a coherent and theorised shape in the art and theory of the late 1960s and 1970s.

in this chapter. Foucault's genealogy of representation in *The Order of Things* points to the overturning of a "Classical" model, which regarded language as "transparent" or "invisible", by late nineteenth century literature and philosophy (1966: 79), and connects a new emphasis on the mediating role of language with the advent of Humanism (1966: 312). In his essay *Structure, Sign, and Play*, Derrida suggests two modes of reflexivity, both of them connected to a doubling back of thought or language upon itself, one that seeks to affirm the idea of the centre, and the other pointing to the 'freeplay' of the signifier and way that meaning is always 'deferred' (1966: 292). Barthes' call for the *Death of the Author* sees a text not as "a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of an author god)" but as a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, clash and blend" (Culler 1983:33).

As I understand it, although the writings of these theorists vary in many other respects, the idea that representations do not transparently reflect a given truth but, as disseminators as well as products of social, cultural and political discourse, actively *construct* what we understand as 'truth', was taken up by the Humanities as a powerfully convincing model, and aspects of both older and contemporary texts that in various ways exemplify this idea started to receive attention. The relationship between representation and 'reality', or mimesis and diegesis, is explored by critics, such as Linda Hutcheon, Patricia Waugh, Robert Stam and Jeffrey Williamson, who write specifically about reflexivity, while others, notably Steven Conner, and Lisa Cartwright and Martia Sturken, touch on it in the course of a more general discussion on postmodernism. Other critics, such as Donald Kuspit and Richard Kearney, focus on the changes in the perceived role of the artist that accompany changing ideas about representation.

Informed by these ideas (which will find a more detailed exposition at the end of this chapter) this chapter looks at the development of distinctive forms of reflexivity in modernism and postmodernism. It examines the changes in the relationships between the subject, form and the world within these periods in three sections. First, it considers the role of the artist as subject in reflexivity, by looking at how the reflexivity seen in both modernism and postmodernism is related to changes in the way the subject has been understood since the Enlightenment. Next, it explores the distinctively modern emphasis

on the relationship between form and the psychological self in modern art and literature while suggesting ways in which it prefigures postmodern reflexivity. Finally, it uses insights from post-modern theorists, particularly Foucault and Derrida, to explore the consequences of these shifts in the understanding of subject and form and the resultant self-conscious celebration of reflexivity in postmodernism.

However, although this chapter draws on a Derridean distinction between reflexivity which seeks a center and freeplay (1966: 294) to explore the differences between reflexivity in modernism and postmodernism, it also provides the theoretical basis for the argument which is developed through the body of the thesis: that each type of reflexivity can be found in the other, and enriches and enlivens it; that a concern with both context and content is a necessary part of the reflexive process.

## **1.2. REFLEXIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY: FROM THE ENLIGHTENMENT SELF TO THE DECENTERED SUBJECT**

The term *subjectivity* is widely used in contemporary discourse from psychoanalysis to linguistic theory to talk about what it means to have and be a self, how our sense of self is formed, and how our understanding of what a 'self' is has changed over time. Changes in our self-perception are bound up in changing theories about the role of representation. An uncertainty as to the ability of representational systems to mirror reality developed alongside an awareness of the role that language and other systems of representation play in *shaping* the self, leading to skepticism regarding the subject's ability to be present to itself or 'know itself'. This doubt about what can be known about the self is linked (perhaps somewhat circularly) to shifts in what the nature of that self was considered to be. As I argue in the body of this thesis, reflexive moments in modernism and postmodernism are linked to a rethinking of subjectivity, and can be seen to critique the idea of the centred, stable self, pointing towards a different understanding of the subject.

### **1.2.1 Enlightenment theories of the self**

In order to understand contemporary theories of the subject it is necessary to first briefly look at Enlightenment theories of the self. The Enlightenment, according to Nick

Mansfield, can be seen as the period that runs roughly from Francis Bacon (1561-1626) to the French Revolution of 1789 (2000: 1). As Stuart Hall tells us, it is perhaps more accurate to see the Enlightenment as a “tendency towards philosophical inquiry” than a “coherent intellectual movement” (1992: 26). This inquiry was directed towards the nature of the self in the work of key Enlightenment thinkers René Descartes (1596-1650), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

As Mansfield points out, Descartes, whose famous ‘cogito’, ‘I think therefore I am’, inaugurates the “modern tradition in western thought”, viewed *consciousness* as the defining characteristic of the self (2000: 14). Descartes’ desire to free rational thought from the “wisdom of the ancients” and to arrive at truths about the world solely by means of the exercise of reason by the “self-reflexive” mind, was founded on the certainty of the existence of the thinking self (Cascardi 1992: 26).<sup>9</sup>

Where Descartes emphasises the sufficiency of the thinking self unto itself, Rousseau unites the rationalism of the Enlightenment with the concern with feelings and sensibility that characterised the Romanticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a belief in the uniqueness of the individual, a conviction that the complexities of one man are worthy of sustained study, and an unquestioning faith in his ability to both ‘know’ himself and to represent himself accurately (Mansfield 2000: 16). Although, as Mansfield points out, Rousseau regards feeling and sensory experience as an important part of himself, (including accounts of masturbation and his “quasi-incestuous desires for the woman he called Mama”), like Descartes he sees the self as “making sense”, as a unique entity that can be known, understood, and represented (2000: 17).

The work of Kant develops, and can be seen as bringing into question, Descartes’ ideas about the self. Like Descartes, Kant sees consciousness as “the defining faculty of the self” (Mansfield 2000: 18). For Kant, in order for us to experience the world, we “must first have an awareness of ourselves and a sense of unity of self” (Mansfield 2000: 19). According to Mansfield, the Kantian subject is one who is able, from the stable basis of

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9 As Mansfield comments, “this emphasis on the self as the origin of all experience and knowledge seems glaringly obvious to us, but this merely indicates how much we still live in the wake of the mutation in Western thinking that Descartes’ work represents” (2000:14).

the self, to interpret its experiences in the world by means of reliable mental representations that enable the subject to make sense of the world (2000: 19). However, although the experience of the world is rooted in the self, Kant's work in fact suggests that it is impossible to understand or "experience" consciousness, as "it is the experience": it is impossible for the "I that sees" to "see itself" (Thompson in Hall 2004: 27).

Although both modern and postmodern theories about subjectivity pose challenges to the Enlightenment model of the self as an individual with a unique, inherent personality, able to make accurate representations of the world by means of reason, as Mansfield suggests, the "very fact that it became necessary to define subjectivity at a certain moment in Western thought, that traditional practices and languages of selfhood were no longer to be taken for granted, opened up a field of contention, crisis, and perpetual re-evaluation of the self" (2000:14). This re-evaluation of the self, already present in the Enlightenment, and continued through modernism and postmodernism, takes place in part through a re-evaluation of the role of representations (specifically language).

### 1.2.2. The destabilisation of the subject

The challenge to the Enlightenment idea of the self can be split into two camps, which can be identified with modernism and postmodernism respectively<sup>10</sup>. Mansfield distinguishes between a *subjective* and an *anti-subjective* theory of subjectivity (2000: 8). The former is identified with Freud and psychoanalysis. It challenges the self-presence of the enlightenment subject by introducing the idea that our deepest drives come from the realm of the *unconscious*, and destabilises the idea of an inherent personality by suggesting that subjectivity is formed by a complex process of social interaction, but nevertheless regards subjectivity as a *thing* which can be studied and known. The subject doubles back on itself, again, in order to understand how it is constituted, and in a reflexive move, seeks self-knowledge. The second challenge to the Enlightenment self

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted here that there is a distinction between cultural and philosophical modernism. While modern philosophy can be seen to begin with the Enlightenment, cultural modernism as it manifests in art and literature, the complexities of its origins notwithstanding, takes on a coherent shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

can be identified with the type of thinking influenced by Foucault (Mansfield 2000: 8), which sees subjectivity more as a performance, enacted in various ways at various times. According to this view, subjectivity is not the expression of an inner self but a mode of being: the way that we have been socialised into behaving (Mansfield 2000: 10). This way of thinking about the subject can be identified with postmodernism, which stresses the way in which language and other representational systems not only mediate but actively inform our sense of self to the extent that language can be seen to precede the subject, speaking it, as it were, rather than it speaking them.

### **1.2.3. Reflexivity and Subjectivity**

The preceding paragraphs show that the very existence of the idea of subjectivity involves a turning of the subject back upon itself and, in this sense, it is a reflexive act. Early uses of the terms ‘subjectivity’ and ‘reflexivity’ make their special relationship particularly clear. Stam tells us that the term ‘reflexivity’ was first used in the fields of philosophy and psychology, where it “referred to the mind’s capacity to be both subject and object to itself within the cognitive process” in other words, to the (possibly unique) human ability to reflect critically upon our own ways of thinking and being (1992: 13). This use of ‘reflexivity’ is strikingly similar to early uses of the term ‘subjectivity’. This emphasis on the self-conscious, individual mind as the defining quality of human existence can be seen in Descartes’ *cogito*, and arguably characterises early modern and Enlightenment thinking about the self. Paradoxically, it is this definition of the human subject as centred in complete knowledge and control of itself that the reflexivity of contemporary theory and creative practice seeks to undermine.

The word ‘subjectivity’ also has another meaning when it is opposed to ‘objectivity’, which illuminates a further aspect of its connection to ‘reflexivity’. If something is ‘subjective’, in this sense, its meaning is dependant on its context rather than on an independent and unchanging given, i.e. much depends on the light in which it is seen. Calling something ‘subjective’ indicates an awareness of the circumstances which surround it and the power of the interpretive process. Reflexive texts can similarly call attention to the particular conditions, whether economic, cultural, or ideological, that

inform them, or, to put it another way, reflexive artists/authors routinely refer to their own role, position, or identity as artists/authors.

Linked to this meaning of being dependent on context is another connotation that ‘subjectivity’ carries: that of being subject to, governed by, or having to ‘pay fealty’ to some controlling power, a meaning which is present as much when we talk about the subjects of a king as when Robins describes the different ‘subject positions’ occupied by a protagonist (2005: 9) such as Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Although Stephen rejects the dominant structures of the Catholic religion and Irish nationalism in a bid to discover his own identity, Robins points out that he cannot escape the influence of either (2005: 101). His ‘freedom’ is only a reaction against collectively held beliefs and values. As Robins puts it, “there can be no blasphemy or profanity if the structures of belief are not at least minimally still intact” (2005: 101).

This way of thinking about ourselves as human subjects (that who we are, how we think and what we make is shaped by societal structures into which we are born) is bound up in the same broader theoretical shifts that make reflexivity such a central concern in both modern and postmodern theory. The shift from the belief in the individual as a self-aware and autonomous entity with a God-given or ‘natural’ personality to an understanding of subjectivity as constructed and performed is intimately caught up in the shift from a view of language and representation as a transparent vehicle to an active constitutor of meaning.

If a contemporary use of the word ‘subjectivity’ refers to those collective practises and beliefs that both shape and enable us to understand *who we are*, it makes sense that we speak of different *subjectivities*. These can be located in different cultural groups, or – as is important to my argument – in different theoretical orientations, which are grounded in, though not limited to, certain historical eras. Thus my discussion so far has contrasted an Enlightenment way of thinking about subjectivity with a mode of thought that seeks to question the unitary, self-conscious, self-determining subject. This questioning and re-defining of the subject, I will argue, characterises the reflexivity of both modern and

postmodern texts, but with varying and sometimes conflicting inflections, especially as regards the view of the centred subject as the author of inner meaning, and the understanding of the artwork as a direct expression of the inner personality of the artist/author.

### **1.3: IN SEARCH OF A NEW LANGUAGE: MODERNISM, FORM AND THE SELF**

*Words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still. - T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton* (1936: 190).*

Artistic and literary modernism, in so far as they can be considered reflexive, involve a turning back of both the medium and the subject on itself, by means of a sustained and self-conscious engagement with form and a fascination with individual psychological experience. In the visual arts there was an increased emphasis on the expressive potential (as opposed to the descriptive function) of formal elements such as colour, line and composition. Van Gogh stressed that “colour does something in itself, one cannot do without this” (Auden 1961: 254), while drawing to Paul Klee was about “taking a line for a walk” (Klee in Macmillan 2000: 1).<sup>11</sup> As Cartwright and Sturken point out, “the role of art was reconceived in modernism to consider form as a primary focus.

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<sup>11</sup> Artists as diverse as Walsy Kandinsky (*fig.1*), Piet Mondrian (*fig.2*) Jackson Pollock (*fig.3*), Mark Rothko (*fig.4*), and Donald Judd (*fig.5*) emphasised the formal properties of their chosen medium to the complete exclusion of figurative subject matter (although a figurative way of reading the image is often suggested by the title, as in Pollock’s *Blue Poles*, or Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie*). Others, from Pablo Picasso (*fig.6*) and Henri Matisse (*fig.7*) to Giorgio De Chirico (*fig.8*) and E.L. Kirchner (*fig.9*) experimented with formal conventions while retaining direct references to people, objects, places or events. While it would be simplistic to assume that the tendency towards abstraction and the experimentation with formal conventions was driven by the same concerns in each case, there is a way in which all these artists can be seen as exploring inner reality. Although this is perhaps a contentious statement, it is useful here to distinguish between the spiritual/philosophical/emotional terrain that interested artists of the late-nineteenth century, and the physical, daily, material ‘reality’ depicted by nineteenth century Realists.



The *avant-garde* artists of the early twentieth century took apart conventions of representational art by creating abstract paintings whose content was the form itself” (Cartwright & Sturken 2001: 243).<sup>12</sup>

The formal conventions of the novel likewise became the subject of experimentation and scrutiny. *To the Lighthouse* and *Ulysses* reinvent the broader structure of the novel (re-framed by Virginia Woolf as “elegy”, and James Joyce as “epic”) as well as its grammar and syntax. At the same time, the works of these artists are all concerned with the portrayal of individual subjectivity. Novels such as *To the Lighthouse* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* attempt the presentation of ‘reality’ as perceived through the lens of the individual mind, while paintings like van Gogh’s *Night Café* (fig. 10) are emphatically *subjective* accounts of the emotional or psychological experience of a place. This doubling back of both the form and the subject, which can be understood in terms of the crisis in representation that Walter Benjamin identified as beginning in the mid-nineteenth century (Lewis 2007: 1), must be understood against a backdrop of general societal change. As Pericles Lewis reminds us, if art’s aim had been understood as representation of reality, then “innovations in the means of representation cannot be entirely extricated from the problem of the new realities that the artist feels no longer able to represent by the old means” (2007: 2). In this section I will describe and contextualise modernism’s reflexive impulse with view to drawing out the ways in which it is linked to, as well as distinct from postmodern reflexivity.

### 1.3.1. The Burden of Tradition

The implications of this foregrounding of form take on certain clarity when viewed in relation to the ‘tradition’ of illusionism dominant in Europe since the Renaissance. This tradition can crudely but usefully be understood as manifesting in nineteenth century Realist art and literature as a desire to “give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life” (Nochlin 1971: 13). Although nineteenth century Realism, as practiced by, for example,

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<sup>12</sup> This formulation brings the work of artists such as Kandinsky or Mondrian to mind, whose work excluded any reference to figurative subject matter. However, works do not have to be abstract in this sense to emphasise form.

Gustave Courbet or Émile Zola, was undeniably politically motivated in that it was concerned with the depiction of lives impacted by social inequality, it *utilised* the language of verisimilitude, with its connotations of veracity and scientific neutrality, as a tool to persuade and convince.<sup>13</sup> Deborah Parsons has characterised the realist novel as making extensive use of “referential language” to describe people, places and actions, creating the impression that the world, or reality, was coherent and knowable (Parsons 2007: 23). While the work of artists and authors associated with Realism [for example, Courbet, Daumier, Zola] differ significantly in terms of individual focus, certain artists and authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century consciously formulated their opinions in response to what they saw as a more or less homogenised tradition in which the *language* of paint or prose was important only in so far as it served the description of an external, communal reality. This tradition was based, as Foucault points out, on faith in the ability of language to represent the world truthfully and accurately, and assumes a 1:1 correspondence between language and the world. In the *Order of Things*, Foucault says that nineteenth century language “makes itself invisible, or almost so. In any case, it has become so transparent to representation that its very existence ceases to be a problem” (1966: 79).

The loose, rapid brushwork and incomplete aesthetic of certain late nineteenth century French Impressionist works can be seen to constitute a radical break with this invisible language of verisimilitude. Paintings like Millet’s *The Angelus* (1858) (*fig. 11*), Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers* (1849) (*fig. 12*) or even Manet’s *The Execution of the Emperor Maximillian* (1867) (*fig. 13*) tend to suppress individual or gestural marks in favour of a seemingly uninhibited or transparent window onto scenes from contemporary life. In a marked contrast to this version of illusionism, the canvases of Monet, Degas, Renoir, and Manet’s later works make explicit the hazy screen of weather, distance, and light-

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<sup>13</sup> However, the unequivocal identification of nineteenth century Realism with a type of radical socialism that championed the cause of the poor is misleading, overlooking the “stamp of ambivalence” that, for Nochlin, characterised the Realist project (1971:46). An argument could also be made, for example, that Millet’s images of peasants, although at first shocking because of the monumental scale and “unadorned frankness” of their prosaic subjects, soon became acceptable to the general public (Thompson 1990:146) and could in turn be seen as romanticising the lifestyle they depict, endowing the peasant’s existence with a kind of nobility that perhaps made the continued existence of a suffering working class more excusable to the bourgeoisie, who were increasingly able and interested in buying art.

conditions through which their subjects are perceived, functioning more as *impressions*<sup>14</sup> of reality than as carefully detail descriptions.

By the 1880's, however, as Thompson points out, there was a level of disillusionment with the perceived 'naturalism' of both Impressionism and Realism within certain artistic and intellectual circles (1990: 90). The dissatisfaction with what was perceived as a constant focus on the impressions of the senses, to the exclusion of any emotive or spiritual content<sup>15</sup>, as well as a continued enslavement to 'nature'<sup>16</sup>, was present in responses to both literature and painting. In 1883, speaking about the dominant trends in both art and literature, the Symbolist poet Jean Moréas voiced a growing concern that: "For almost twenty years we have had an art which has systematically denied the ideal, which has taken material description as its immediate aim, has substituted the 'sensation' for the study of the soul, hardening itself in detail and anecdote, and becoming intoxicated with platitude and vulgarity" (Moréas in Thompson 1990:90). The value of Moreás' words are that they make explicit the strength of a fairly widespread reaction against a perceived lack of emotion, or 'soul' in Realism and Impressionism, and make clear how the turn towards deliberate distortion and simplification, evident in much modern art, was at this time connected to an emphasis on the importance of spiritual or emotional content in art.

Among the younger generation of novelists writing in the interwar years in Europe there was a similar dissatisfaction with the traditional realist novel, the origins of which are commonly linked to the rise of liberal capitalism in Europe in the eighteenth century and the conventions of which were felt to echo the "secular, empirical and materialist understanding of the world that it promoted" (Parsons 2007:23). This dissatisfaction was expressed by Woolf in *Poetry, Fiction and the Future*. "Everywhere," she writes, "writers are attempting what they cannot achieve, forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it." (Woolf in Parsons 2007:2).

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14 The name "Impressionism" itself implies a certain acknowledgement of the subjective conditions of perception.

15 Thompson describes the change in the critical atmosphere as general shift from a scientific Positivism to a neo-Platonic idealism (1990: 90)

16 Monet recounts his experience of seeing "a women who had been and still was very dear to me" on her deathbed: "...I caught myself, my eyes fixed on her tragic forehead, in the act of mechanically analysing the succession of appropriate colour gradations which death was imposing on her immobile face. Tones of blue, of yellow, of grey, what have you? This is the point I had reached" (Monet in Noehlin 1971:63).

### 1.3.2. “The Shock of the New”

Key to the sense of dissatisfaction with the realist/illusionist mode evident in the words of Moréas and Woolf was the fact that painters and writers around the turn of the nineteenth century felt themselves to be living in a time of rapid and immense change. In *The Shock of the New*, Robert Hughes describes this sense of change by quoting the French writer Charles Péguy, who remarked in 1912 that “the world has changed less since the time of Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years” (1980: 9). According to Hughes, Péguy was speaking of “all the conditions of Western Capitalist society: its idea of itself, its sense of history, its belief, pieties, and modes of production— and its art” (1980: 9).

In *Formations of Modernity*, Stuart Hall points out that although modern societies have usually been thought of as arising with industrialization in the nineteenth century, they are in fact the outcome of radical, simultaneous changes in many spheres (1992: 1). Along with the economic changes ushered in by industrialisation, there was a political shift from religious to secular dominance; a shift from a social order with fixed social hierarchies and overlapping allegiances to the new class formations of modern capitalist societies; and a spiritual (or ideological) shift from a religious world view to one informed by the rise of a “secular and materialist culture, exhibiting those individualistic, rationalist, and instrumental impulses now so familiar to us” (1992: 6). In addition to the changes in the economic, political, social and religious fabric of life, Hall points out there were also two groups of major cultural shifts taking place in the process of forming modern societies. First, there were dramatic shifts in Europe’s “intellectual and moral universe”; and second, “the construction of cultural and social identities” i.e. “the construction of a sense of belonging which draws people together into an “imagined community” and the construction of symbolic boundaries which define who does *not* belong or is excluded from it” (1992: 7).

Halls’ use of “formations” stresses a model of continuity and emphasises the ways in which modern societies developed over time instead of appearing overnight. However, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can equally be seen as a time of rupture

and disjuncture. The primarily Paris-based<sup>17</sup> artistic activity of the late 1900's, for example, commonly held to have revolutionised western painting, took place amidst ongoing class struggle and against a background of recent international warfare<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, the formal experimentation of literary modernism in the early twentieth century took place between the upheaval of the First and Second World Wars. Urbanisation and Industrialisation were likewise experienced as rapid and unsettling.

Equally unsettling were the ideas emerging in disciplines as wide as philosophy, science and psychology, that were at once part of the spirit of supposedly value-free scientific and intellectual inquiry, which characterised the Enlightenment, and constituted a questioning of its very foundations (Hall 1992:2). Einstein's theories, first published in 1905 (special relativity) and 1915 (general relativity), emphasised the fact that phenomena can only be understood with reference to the position from which they are observed and highlighted the fact that "scientific laws themselves are universalised conventions" (Parsons 2007:111). The French philosopher Henry Bergson's writing on duration, published in 1910, which discusses the way time is experienced in the mind, challenged the idea that an absolute knowledge of physical time and space was possible, and emphasized intuition as the most important means by which reality can be understood (Parsons 2007: 57/112). I have already referred to the impact of Freud's work in psychoanalysis. In many different areas of investigation, the picture of one stable, coherent reality that could be understood through logic and represented by language was disintegrating. Form was no longer adequate to 'reality' precisely because what was perceived as constituting 'reality' was changing.

### 1.3.3. Imaging the Self

The formal experimentation of writers and artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can thus be seen as a response to a sense of rapid change. This

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<sup>17</sup> Most of van Gogh's paintings, like those of Cézanne and Gauguin, were outside of Paris; nevertheless, he is usually grouped with the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters who exhibited in Paris.

<sup>18</sup> Wars and revolutions that fall within the nineteenth century include the Revolutions of 1848 (February Revolution in Paris, March Revolution in Berlin and other cities, October Revolution in Austria), Crimean War, 1853-56, the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), Russo-Turkish War 1877, the defeat of China by Japan (1892-95), the Spanish American War (1898), and the Boer War (1899-1902).

response was fraught with a fundamental tension: the tension between a desire to find a new form with which to image modern reality, and a growing doubt as to the ability of language to accomplish this. The drive of modernity to picture itself, which to some critics (Cascardi, Silverman) is key to an understanding of the era, is accompanied by a questioning of traditional illusionistic modes of representation.

### *1.3.3.1: Psychological realism and the expressive fallacy*

What Linda Nochlin refers to as the “obsessive ... preoccupation with and self-consciousness about the *means* of art” (1971: 15), which manifested in the emphasis on form in nineteenth and early twentieth century art and literature, can thus be understood as motivated by a “loss of belief” in a single, stable concept of “reality” (Waugh 1984: 7). Artists and writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rejected the idea that the external world could and should be described accurately and objectively. Instead, painters such as Van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin began to explore the idea that the formal elements of painting (such as line, colour, or composition) could convey meaning independently of their subject. The rejection of conventional modelling, and the emphasis on flatness, or on gesture, in early modern paintings were a way of focusing attention on the *artifice* of art, its wrought, made, or symbolic (as opposed to descriptive) function. Similarly, as Patricia Waugh in quoting Pfeifer points out,

novels like Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, or James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, signalled the first widespread, overt emergence in the novel of a sense of fictitiousness: “a sense that any attempt to represent reality could only produce selective perspectives, fictions, that is, in an epistemological, not merely the conventional literary, sense”. (1984: 7)

The formal experimentation of modern artists and writers can thus be regarded as similar to the more overt emphasis of postmodern reflexive texts on fictionality or constructedness, in that they foreground art as *art* and not as a mirror of nature. The focus on and experimentation with form, when seen as a reaction to an exhausted illusionistic or realistic tradition, shares something with postmodern reflexivity: both respond to the loss of traditional values with an increased emphasis on the means or method of representation; both exhibit a skepticism with regards to the ability of

representational language to accurately or transparently reflect reality; and both show the self to be fragmentary, unstable and decentred.

However, the “stylistic multiplicity” of modernism, while questioning the possibility of a single, omniscient point of view, can always be recuperated, as Brian Hale maintains, by “a theory of psychology” (in Conner 1989: 30). What Hale suggests is that, although self-conscious fiction like *To the Lighthouse* can be seen to draw attention to its own aesthetic construction, it can still be understood as a kind of newly depended or expanded realism, as a picture of reality *as perceived by the human psyche*. Thus the novels of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy Richardson have also been referred to as *psychological realism* (Parsons 2007), in that, for all their play with the form of the novel, they can still be encapsulated or understood by the framework of individual consciousness, messy and uncontrollable, contrary and contradictory though that consciousness may be. For Donald Kuspit, the increasing focus on internal reality is linked to the threat posed to art by modern science and technology, specifically photographic technology, which subsume its mimetic function and thus deprive it, he says, rather apocalyptically, of a “reason for being”. The assertion of art’s ability to *express* is thus connected to its superseded ability to depict (1993: 9).

As critics such as Griselda Pollock, Hal Forster and Victor Burgin have pointed out, the emphasis on formal experimentation and psychological reality in modern art has given rise to what Forster terms “the expressive fallacy” (1985: 59): the idea that modern artists eschewed the tedious and limiting conventions of illusionism in favour of more direct or immediate expression of internal psychological or emotional reality. Pollock points out that this “fallacy” can be seen in interpretations of van Gogh’s work as a direct expression of his inner self. “Following the early twentieth century German appropriation fuelled by Julius Meier-Graef’s charged writings on the artist as a man of passionate longing” she writes, “van Gogh has been often understood as a painter driven by inner compulsion to ‘express’ his personality in a direct painterly relation with the material world around him” (2004: 1). For Pollock, “This is the fiction of naïve realism” (2004: 1). Forster points out that “it is easy to fall into this fallacy: for example, we

commonly say that an expressionist like Kandinsky ‘broke through’ representation, when in fact he replaced (or superposed) one form with another” (1985: 60). For Foster, both ‘classical’ and ‘expressive’ modes of painting are ‘codes’: “the classical painter suppresses non-naturalistic marks and colours so as to simulate (a staged) reality; the expressionist ‘frees’ such marks and colors of naturalism so as to simulate direct expression” (1985: 61). Far from escaping the conventions of representation in order to image ‘reality’ directly, the formal experimentation of artists like Kandinsky (or van Gogh) was itself part of a *language* of expression. Because representations *always* actively create rather than transparently reflect meaning, “unmediated expression”, as Forster quotes Paul de Man as saying, “is a philosophical impossibility” (De Man in Forster 1985:59).

In this way, the formal experimentation of writers in the early twentieth century can also paradoxically be understood as a *continuation* of the realist imperative to accurately capture experience.

#### *1.3.3.2 The Limits of Language*

Although modern texts attempt to portray internal or psychological reality in this way, they also contain moments that prefigure postmodern skepticism about the ability of *any* language (not just realistic/naturalistic) language, to image either the external world *or* the self, which I understand as an underlying doubt about, (and which perhaps fuelled the assertion of belief in), the ability of words or pictures to capture the experience of the self in the world in a way that assigned an inviolable meaning to them. I see this disillusionment as playing out in the arena of form as well as of the subject.

The dissatisfaction of modern writers with not only realist form but with their *own* attempts at expression can be seen as manifesting in the way T.S Eliot interrupts his own poem *East Coker* (1940:9):

That was a way of putting it- not very satisfactory:  
A periphrastic study in a worn out poetical fashion,  
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
With words and meanings



In *To the Lighthouse*, it reverberates through Lily Briscoe's observation that "It was intolerable. One could not say what one meant" (Woolf 1927: 28). In the arena of the representation of the self, this unsettling dissatisfaction can be seen in Van Gogh's continual need to give shape to his own image, as well as in the sense of internal crisis that I will argue these images convey.

In their assertion of the renewed ability of a formally innovative art to express the psychology of its creator, reflexive modern texts thus seek anchor in a ground that is already insecure.

#### **1.4: POSTMODERN REFLEXIVITY**

"Although postmodernism has many meanings, all of them carry an element of reflexivity" (Stam 1992:xv).

In the preceding section of this chapter I have argued that the emphasis on form and the self in modern art and literature is linked to a sense of the inadequacy of realism/illusionism in the face of a rapidly changing world. Postmodern reflexive strategies, as we shall see, both intensify and challenge this response.

The feeling that society is fluid and changeable, as opposed to possessed of an inherent order and coherence, is expressed in the introduction to many texts on postmodern cultural output (Hutcheon 1988, Malpas 2005, Cascardi 1992). Simon Malpas' answer to the question, "what is it like to be postmodern?" begins with the assertion that "contemporary culture moves at an almost incomprehensible speed" (2005: 1). With the invention of technology like television, the Internet and cell phones and the increasingly global travel of the relatively wealthy, the westernised world is able to visit, communicate with, and trade with a wider range of countries. William Dunning emphasises this sense of expanded possibility: "Current Euro-American society", he tells us, "is aware of a profusion of alternative modes of thinking and consciousness, derived from other cultures, as no other people or civilization has ever been" (1993: 132). He links this sense of multiplicity to the idea of the fragmentary or unstable self:

Such expanded consciousness seems to shift the contemporary sense of individual identity: more and more we suspect that the twentieth-century Euro-American sense of self is no longer truly unified or indivisible but is instead composed of parts and pieces common to other people and other cultures. (Dunning 1993: 132)

The sense of expansion can also be understood in terms of globalisation, which has political, cultural and economic dimensions. As Simon Malpas points out, “We inhabit a multinational, multimedia, interdependent world marketplace” (2005: 2). This globalisation has its dark side. “Together with the postmodernism of lifestyle and consumer choice”, Malpas comments, “there is, necessarily, another postmodernism: that of deregulation, dispersal and disruption as the securities of tradition and community are continually crushed” (2005: 3). Both the unprecedented choice of lifestyle available to the wealthy and the “dispersal and disruption” of traditional communities, contribute a sense, comparable to that expressed by modern writers and artists, that “civilizations, traditions, and forms of social interaction” (Malpas 2005: 1) are unstable, temporary entities, subject to continual transformation.<sup>19</sup> This sense contributes to the postmodern idea, which we shall explore in more detail later, that ‘civilisation’, and thus the identity of the civilised subject, is not a given but is *constructed* by various forces.

It is also worth mentioning here that the horror of the Holocaust, which both Kiefer and Foer address in their work, was a key event in the development of the kind of thinking we have come to call postmodern. In fact, as Eunice Lipton notes, postmodernism can be regarded as resulting from the events of the Second World War, as “the child of the Holocaust” (2003: 100). In his book, *the Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone argues that the work of Derrida, for example, is a “deeply engaged response” to the events of the Holocaust (2004: abstract). The emergence of detailed accounts of the atrocities of the Nazi death camps highlighted the depravity of which humans are capable, forcing a re-evaluation of the western humanist model, of which Nazi Germany was in some respects an alarming example. The Nazi’s treatment of Jewish people, gypsies, homosexuals, and the disabled, arguably constitutes an extreme example of the

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19 There are, however, two sides to the globalisation debate, with some arguing that agency is stronger than the impact of the kind of ‘global imperialism’ perceived by some and described by Malpas here.

tendency of modern western thought to create hierarchies whereby the worth of one group is affirmed through the rejection of the humanity of others.

Postmodern thinking can thus be seen as developing within a complex network of socio-economic forces and historical events. Just as cultural modernism can be seen as a response to a rapidly changing world, postmodern theory and creative practice is intimately linked to a sense of rupture and multiplicity. The nature of that response, however, is different in important respects, as we shall see.

#### **1.4.2: Flirtatious Reflexivity: postmodernism flaunts its status as fiction**

Examining the relationship between modern and postmodern self-consciousness or self-critique, Patricia Waugh observes: “Postmodernism can be seen to exhibit the same sense of crisis and loss of belief in an external authoritative system of order as that which prompted modernism. Both affirm the constructive powers of the mind in the face of apparent phenomenal chaos” (1984: 22). However, she goes on to say that “Modernist self-consciousness, however, though it may draw attention to the aesthetic construction of the text, does *not* ‘systematically flaunt its own condition of artifice’ (Alter 1975a, p.x) in the manner of contemporary fiction” (Waugh 1984: 22).

The word ‘flaunting’ is key here as it signals a kind of playfulness or ironic sense of humour that often accompanies what Linda Hutcheon describes as postmodernism’s “challenge to the realist notion of representation” (1988: 32). In the work of postmodern artists and writers such as John Fowles, Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, Cindy Sherman, Anselm Kiefer, Gerard Richter and Sigmar Polke, there is arguably a refusal to take their own ‘critique’ seriously, which is linked to changing ideas about both subjectivity and the role of the artist. While modern works also challenged the mode of representation that “presumes the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and natural link between sign and referent or between word and world” (Hutcheon 1988: 32), they did so with an earnestness and a desperate and unstable, but poignant, belief that truth and meaning – or as Woolf puts it, the “pattern behind the cotton wool” (1939:72) – could be created through a formal language renewed by self-reflection. In many postmodern works, the unsettling doubt that surrounded the modern search for ‘truth’ is

replaced by a hardened and at times darkly humorous cynicism. The search itself, with the authorial self at its centre, becomes an object of satire.

Hutcheon maintains that modern artworks questioned illusionism's claims to truth or transparency by "emphasising the opacity of the medium and the self-sufficiency of the signifying system" (1988: 32). Postmodernism, on the other hand, "problematizes both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response, while retaining (in its typically complicitous critical way) the historically attested power of both" (1988:32). While the work of van Gogh and Virginia Woolf does emphasise form, or the medium, to the extent that Hutcheon suggests modernist texts eschew engagement with the 'world', I argue that the works I will discuss *are* intimately engaged with broader social issues. Where, then does the difference lie? Postmodern texts try to speak *about* the world but are also aware of themselves as operating *in* the world, as part of a network of discourse that actively creates what we understand as 'reality' (or 'history', or 'identity'). Although precedents for postmodern reflexivity can be found in modern texts (and even older texts), those texts we call postmodern tend to call attention to their own workings more consciously.

Another key word in Waugh's distinction between modernist and postmodernist critiques of illusion is 'systematic'. While the theories of Fry in *Vision and Design* (1929), and Greenberg in *Art and Culture* (1961) in some ways attempt to explain trends already visible in modern art, it can be argued that much postmodern practice is inspired by the writings of thinkers such as Berger (who presented his massively influential *Ways of Seeing* as a television series in 1972) Foucault and Derrida.<sup>20</sup>

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20 One of the differences between modernist and postmodernist practise is that, while the theories of Fry (1929) and Greenberg (1961) were written in order to explain or justify trends already visible in the arts, postmodern practise is much more heavily informed by theory. There is a much bigger body of theoretical writing about the reflexive turn in postmodernism than there was about form in modernism.

### 1.4.3. Theorists of Postmodern Reflexivity: Foucault and Derrida

To understand the shift from a modernist self-conscious emphasis on aesthetic construction to a postmodern strategic flaunting of fictitiousness, it is necessary to look at some of the theories that both inform and reflect this change. In the same way that the self-critical awareness inherent in the modern concern with form can be seen to both break with, and continue, the Enlightenment focus on individuality and self-analysis, postmodern reflexivity can be seen as both developing and challenging self-critical or self-conscious trends already present in modern art and literature.

Theorists like Freud and Nietzsche, who contributed to the destabilisation of the Enlightenment world view, (which I have argued was a contributing factor to the concern with form and individual psychological experience in modernism), are also regarded by later critics of modern thought, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, as creating or clearing the critical space in which they themselves operate. Foucault, for example, sees Nietzsche as opening up a space in which the active role language plays in constructing ‘reality’, and the *limits* of language as a representational medium (i.e. it cannot reflect or capture completely the thing it describes), can begin to be considered (1966: 306). Similarly, Derrida cites “the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics”, “the Freudian critique of self-presence” and “the Heideggerean destruction of metaphysics, of onto-theology” (1966: 280) as informing his own ‘decentering’, which I will address later in this chapter. However, while the modernist concern with form and postmodern theory about reflexivity thus share certain predecessors and can both be considered as part of the crisis of representation, the difference lies in postmodern thinkers’ more overt, stated, self-conscious, more thoroughgoing approach, as well a much more explicit or programmatic ethical dimension.

This second point about the ethical dimension requires some explanation. Postmodern reflexive strategies often have a kind of ethical (though perhaps they would disapprove of this word) end in mind: to show the role of representation in constructing ideas or norms about race or gender, or sexual preferences, for example. As opposed to Greenbergian formalism, which has been perceived as disconnected from life, critics such as Conner emphasise the re-historicisation that postmodernism attempts, commenting that

"postmodernism involves the re-angling of [...]self-reflexiveness back to the real, historical world" (Conner 1989: 132). As Hutcheon puts it in *Narcissistic Narratives*, the difference between the type of 'self-consciousness' seen in certain modern texts and the 'auto-awareness' of later texts, "lies in the newly expanded scope of the 'vital' mimetic contact between 'art' and 'life'" (1980: 154).

#### *1.4.3.1. Foucault and the limits of representation*

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault examines the history of representation from the sixteenth century to the present, looking at changes in the understanding of systems of signification or meaning-making (like language), in an effort to approach the underlying structures, or *epistemes*, of each era, which give rise to and limit what can be thought. Foucault sees the 'Modern' era as reviving and strengthening a consciousness about or critique of language that was present in the Renaissance, but was suppressed in the 'Classical age' that followed. In the Classical age, the 'language' that had been celebrated by the Renaissance was required to become so transparent that it ceased to 'exist', or rather "its whole existence is located in its representational role, is limited precisely to that role" and "has no other value than in representation" (Foucault 1966: 74). Foucault sees the Modern age as a time where language itself again becomes somehow thick and problematic. "In the philological space opened up by Nietzsche" he writes, "language wells up in an enigmatic multiplicity" (1966: 305), and thought is "brought back, and violently so, towards language itself, towards its unique and difficult being" (1966: 306). Thus Foucault sees modernism as the beginning of a significant change in the way representation is understood; a time when representation starts to "radically reflect" (1966: 305) upon itself, i.e. becomes reflexive.

Foucault also connects the Modern era with the "birth of man", or the advent of humanism, arguing that with the shift in thinking about representation that marked the end of the nineteenth century, "man appeared in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows" (1966: 312). It is only when language ceased to be "invisible" that the subject began to interrogate its own "mode of being" (1966: 312). Modern humanism is thus linked in Foucault's view to an altered

understanding/questioning of representation. Although there is a sense in which Foucault corroborates Greenberg's view of modernism as inherently or characteristically self-reflexive or self-critical, he is at the same time disillusioned with it: he shows "Man" not as the inevitable center of human life that modern thought had at last uncovered, but as an "invention", a construct enabled by the modern episteme. He talks about the "anthropological sleep", implying that humanism, as much as Classical thought, involves a certain lack of consciousness and has certain blind spots. Foucault's account of Modern self-criticality is thus ambivalent or skeptical, whereas Greenberg's is celebratory, triumphant.

#### *1.4.3.3 Derrida and Doubling*

The emphasis on textuality and intertextuality in Derrida's writing feeds into my understanding of reflexivity in the following way. For Derrida, the things to which representations or 'signifiers' refer are not units of stable, fixed meaning. Rather, these 'signifieds' are always also signifiers in themselves, referring in turn to yet more signifiers. Thus the meaning of a certain text has to be determined with reference to the network of other texts in which it occurs, and these other texts in turn refer to yet more texts. Texts thus occur within a context that can never be exhaustively summarised or understood. In this way, the ultimate or final significance of a representation is always indefinitely deferred. I will argue that one of the reflexive strategies of postmodern, and, to an extent, modern paintings and novels, is the foregrounding of their own position as texts within a network of texts (i.e. their own intertextuality), as well as a skepticism about the possibility of fixing meaning in a universal way.

Derrida also argues that writing has been regarded by the western philosophical tradition, from Plato to Rousseau, as a dangerous and potentially subversive supplement to speech, cut off as it is from the supposedly authoritative source of its meaning. The "threat posed by writing" to the philosophical tradition is that "the operation of what should be merely a means of expression might affect or infect the meaning it is supposed to represent" (Culler 1983: 91). Derrida's point, however, is that language, even spoken language, is *never* merely a means of expression and *always* impacts on meaning.

Derrida's essay on *Structure, Sign, and Play in the human sciences* can be seen as corroborating the reflections on language or representation expressed in *The Order of Things*, and, like Foucault's book, *enacts* a critique of the assumptions that underlie Western metaphysics Foucault's book. This essay itself constitutes a reflexive act: it is not a critique from an objective standpoint but a doubling back of metaphysics on itself. This "redoubling" occurs when "the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought" (1966: 278) i.e. when thought about the "structures", like language, family, religion, that order and shape human experience, begins to be critically conscious of itself.

The 'centre' is a term Derrida uses to refer to an organising principle, such as a belief in religion or rational humanism<sup>21</sup>, that can always be related back to a "presence", to "essence, existence, substance, subject, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth" (1966: 278). Each centre posits itself as natural, inevitable, true, "by definition unique" (1966: 278). However, Derrida points out that the before the rupture of what we now call post-structuralist thought, "the whole history of the concept of structure...must be thought of as a series of substitutions center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center. Successively and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names" (1966: 279). For Derrida, the centre's substitutability points to the centre's cultural, human construction, motivated by some or other "desire". To see the centre in this way, as replaceable or somehow empty, is to show how it "has its center elsewhere", to decentre it, and to "extend the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*" (1966: 279). Although the endless play of the signifier in some ways lends itself to a profoundly relativistic view, the dismantling of the concept of the centre is intended as something of an ethical act, in that it challenges the authority of systems like Humanism and Western Christianity that are seen as essentially exclusive. Derrida is thus here proposing as "necessary", as well as himself enacting, a "redoubling", an "interpretation of interpretation" (1966: 292). Although he does not use the term, he is *being* reflexive, and his reflexivity comes from or is related to, a sense of multiple possibilities, multiple possible centres, and in this way is related to, and informed by, the modern critique of one dominant, stable reality.

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21 Humanism, as I understand Foucault to mean it, involves the idea that man is the centre of meaning, that everything derives significance from its relation to him, and that he can both know himself and control his own destiny.



However, Derrida outlines two possible kinds of “interpretation of interpretation”, which I want to suggest correlate to the two types of bending back, or self-critique, that I have been indentifying: the modern concern with form and self-mirroring and the postmodern flaunting of fictionality. The first type of “doubling” that Derrida describes “seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and the order of the sign” (1966: 292). In contrast to this continued search for the centre, there is another type of doubling which “is no longer turned towards the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism” (Derrida 1966: 292). The concern with form in modern art and literature, I will argue, although it constitutes a kind of doubling back, is, like Derrida’s first kind of reflexivity, still preoccupied with presence, origin, and truth. Reflexive strategies in postmodern art and literature, on the other hand, are critical of any claim to complete understanding (either of one’s self or the world), and are more concerned with emphasising what Derrida calls “freeplay”- the elusiveness and continual shifting of language.

## **1.5 CONCLUSION**

Both modernism and postmodernism can thus be seen as reflexive, though in distinctly different ways. Both form part of a crisis in representation that is part of a constellation of socio-cultural and economic change. Both involve a challenge to the idea that the subject can represent reality through language. However, where modernist reflexivity seeks to recuperate representation’s referential function at the level of a formal order or poetic truth, postmodern reflexivity seeks to affirm the freeplay of representations.

In the chapters that follow, I will trace these two types of reflexivity in the work of modern and postmodern artists and authors, and argue that, in creative practice, each often contains traces of the other, and that they create a necessary and vital tension.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

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### **REFLEXIVITY, FORM AND EXPRESSION IN THE WORK OF VINCENT VAN GOGH**

#### **2.1. INTRODUCTION**

Vincent van Gogh has come to be regarded as a typically modern artist, almost a prototype of that strand of modernism which combined a questioning of formal conventions with an insatiable drive to image or ‘express’ inner psychological reality.<sup>22</sup> His work developed at a time when there was both a radical reinvention of the methods and aims of painting, and increasing focus, in many areas of life, on the unique individual as the center of meaning, which reiterated and strengthened the Romantic idea of the artist as the sensitive barometer of the ills of society.

Van Gogh’s emphasis on the formal properties of the medium as themselves constituting meaning, accompanied by his attempt to convey a specific idea through his paintings, can be identified with Derrida’s first kind of re-doubling, in other words, with a type of reflexivity that doubles back with a view to grasping or understanding itself, in order to arrive at truth (through finding or retrieving essential forms). However, along with the increased focus on the both the form of painting and the expression of subjectivity, there are moments where van Gogh’s particularly gestural manner of working and his extensive self-examination point to the beginnings of a disillusionment with this first type of turning back, and point towards the necessity of the Derrida’s second type of turning. Through a close examination of Van Gogh’s paintings, which both resonate with this first model and gesture towards the second, this chapter will examine van Gogh’s engagement with both form and the self in the light of this dual model of reflexivity.

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<sup>22</sup> As Griselda Pollock has observed, his life, as well as his work, has assumed almost mythic proportions, fuelled by biographical accounts in which he is presented as a man of “passionate longing”, compelled to express his unique personality through the medium of paint. Such accounts, Pollock believes, feed into the “fiction of naïve realism” (2004: 1) and obscure the complexity of van Gogh’s practice.

## **2.2. FORMAL AUTONOMY AS REFLEXIVITY**

In all of van Gogh's paintings, formal elements are used to emphasise the two-dimensionality of the painting and the process that created it. Although, in his letters, van Gogh repeatedly stressed the fact that direct observation was crucial to his practice<sup>23</sup>, his paintings often emphasise harmonies of colour, line and shape over mimetic veracity. In his *Sunflowers* (fig.14), for example, the apparently seamless illusionism of older Dutch flower still lifes, such as Willem van Aelst's *Vase of Flowers with Watch* (fig.15), gives way to open, more impressionistic brushwork, simplified and at times outlined forms, and vibrant but complex colour. Van Aelst's still life is part of the Vanitas tradition which communicated through the symbolic connotations of the various objects. Van Gogh does not necessarily connect a specific meaning to his sunflowers less directly (he remarks in a letter that he intended them to convey a feeling of "gratitude" [van Gogh in de Leeuw 2006: 111 ]<sup>24</sup> ), nor is the use of colour in van Aelst's painting inexpressive simply because it is naturalistic. Van Gogh's painting does seem, however, to lay particular stress on the almost *independent* ability of the medium to impact on the meaning.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For example, a letter to his brother contains the following affirmation of working 'from nature': "To study from nature, to wrestle with reality- I don't want to do away with it, for years and years I myself have done just that, almost fruitlessly and with all kinds of sad results. I should not like to have missed that *error* ... One starts with a hopeless struggle to follow nature, and everything goes wrong; one ends by calmly creating from one's own palette, and nature agrees with it and follows. But these two opposites cannot be separated. The drudging, though it may seem futile, gives an intimacy with nature, a sounder knowledge of things" (van Gogh in Auden 1960:255).

<sup>24</sup> The yellow of the background extends the yellow of the flowers, and although the flowers symbolised gratitude or happiness for him, they are not garish, and are also quite sad in their way.

<sup>25</sup> Van Gogh's incipient formalism would later be formulated by theorists such as Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg into a much more programmatic dogma, characterised by the idea that art must be understood on its own terms (Fry 1929), and that each art form should focus on the formal properties of the medium that are distinct to that medium (Greenberg 1961). A good example of this dogmatic approach was the rhetoric that upheld Abstract Expressionist painting. Tom Wolfe begins his attack on the theories behind abstract expressionism in *The Painted Word* by remarking that art-for-art's-sake abstraction had become such an orthodoxy that the work in many cases existed to merely to illustrate a theory (1975:6) which in turn justified an art that was socially disengaged (25).

### 2.2.1. Colour

It is clear that van Gogh saw colour (or more precisely, certain colour-combinations or relationships, whose effects he studied in books on colour theory)<sup>26</sup> as capable of “expressing something in itself” (van Gogh in Auden 1961:254). The fact that this observation (found in a letter to his brother) is underlined and followed by the words “one cannot do without this” indicates that the expressive impact of colour was not a peripheral concern for him but was central to what he was trying to achieve as a painter (Van Gogh in Auden 1961:254). At the risk of seeming simplistic, then, we could hazard a guess that the extensive use of a variety of yellows in this painting in the flowers, the vase, and the background, from cool lemon yellow to warm orange ochres, is intended to emphasise the theme of happiness or gratitude.

Van Gogh’s emphasis on the emotive and compositional rather than the strictly descriptive potential of colour<sup>27</sup> can be seen to varying extents throughout his oeuvre, especially in his *The Bedroom* (fig. 16), his *Night Café* (fig. 10), and in his many portraits. It could be imagined that this emphasis on colour as “doing something in itself” could create, in a viewer accustomed to the more strictly naturalistic use of colour, an awareness of the artistry, of the *pictureness* of the painting, and the fact that it was made

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<sup>26</sup>Although van Gogh was already acquainted with the “basic laws of colour”, in 1884 he began to study Charles Blanc’s writing on colours, which Richard Dorn describes as “not only an instructive presentation of the law of complementary contrasts but also practical advice on its application.” (2000: 145). Van Gogh also wrote about the *relativity* of colour, stressing that colours need to be seen in relation to each other because they affect and modulate each other. In 1883 he observes “one must not look at local colour by itself, but in conjunction with the colour of the sky!” (van Gogh in Auden 1961: 167). “What does it matter if the fundamental colour of yellow is the same as that of the leaves or not?” he writes to Theo in 1885. “It matters *very little*. *Much, everything* depends on my perception of the infinite variety of tones of one *same family*. ” (Van Gogh in Auden 1961: 254)

<sup>27</sup>As regards the use of precise naturalistic colour in portraiture, he was rather derisive, remarking “What do I care whether the portrait of an honourable citizen tells me exactly the milk-and-watery bluish, insipid colour of that pious man’s face – which I should never have looked at.” (van Gogh in Auden 1961:254). However, although van Gogh can thus be said to use colour expressively, his palette remains relatively naturalistic. In the same sense that his drawing never becomes entirely abstract, his colours are exaggerated, and sometimes unlikely, but not altogether incredible. Although he describes his colour use in August 1888, when *The Old Peasant Patience Escalier* (fig. 17) was painted, as “more arbitrary”, it is possible to regard the yellows and reds of the man’s face as simply a less modulated, more dramatic version of the colours another person might have seen in the same model’s face. Van Gogh describes the “pure metaphysics of colour” as “a mess that is damnably difficult to get out of with any honour”, indicating that, although he was interested in the symbolic or expressive potential of colour, he was wary of a complete departure from a naturalistic approach (van Gogh in Dorn 2003:148).

by someone who was not attempting to mirror nature but to “put an idea into his work” (Van Gogh in Auden 1960:125).

### 2.2.2. Line

Van Gogh often employs line to a similar purpose, especially in his later drawings and paintings. In *Two Cottages, Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer*, (fig. 18) for example, the line begins to break up into painterly dots to convey leaves, and to curl and curve, in a manner reminiscent of the Baroque energy of Rembrandt’s drawings (fig. 19), which van Gogh admired. In a letter to Theo from this time, van Gogh wrote “...I want to get my drawings more deliberate, more exaggerated” (Van Gogh in van Heugten 2006: 104).

By consciously seeking out distortions and simplifications, he aimed to take something of his subjective experience of the landscape and make it explicit. Richard Brettell has commented that Edouard Manet’s *The Funeral* (fig. 20), through its “violent jabbings, scrapings and daubings” positions the viewer “not as an eyewitness to an event, but as an eye-witness to his own emotional response to that event” (2000: 78). Similarly, van Gogh’s paintings are an emphatically subjective account of experience. When van Gogh used the then-popular phrases, “*un coin de la nature vu à travers d’un tempérament*” (a nook of nature seen through (the medium of) a temperament) and “*l’homme ajouté à la nature*” (man added to nature), to describe the work of Rembrandt and Rousseau (van Gogh in Auden 1961: 151), he implied that a painting, or drawing, is an observation through a subjective lens. In *Two cottages*, for instance, the particular use of line and perspective conveys an impression distinctly different to that of a photograph of a similar place (fig. 21). The short, strong, repeated lines that describe the thatched roofs are almost identical to those used to indicate grass by the edge of the furthest cottage. This, together with the distortions in perspective and the varied, organic outline of the roofs and walls, suggest a similarity between the dwellings and their surroundings. Van Gogh’s perhaps somewhat romantic perception of the peasant’s life as being intimately linked to nature is strongly present.<sup>28</sup> Like colour, line is used as an element that could

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<sup>28</sup> In his letters, van Gogh often opposes rural and urban life and connects the peasants’ existence with a more natural, healthy existence. In praise of Millet, whom van Gogh sometimes referred to as

not only evoke three- dimensional space but in itself, in its application, could tell us something about how he saw that place, i.e. how he felt about it, and this was very deliberately done.

Line and colour are thus exploited for their supposedly almost independent capacity to convey meaning, with the effect of foregrounding the presence of these elements in the paintings: one becomes aware of line as line, of colour as colour, of art as art. This is also true of the way that lines are often used to cordon-off space, to outline and flatten shapes. These devices insist on the painting's two dimensional qualities, on the painting as an opaque surface rather than a transparent window or a reflective mirror, as do the sheer volume of paint, the textured, impasto surfaces and the gestural brushstrokes, that dominate many of his paintings.

In this way, the emphasis on form in van Gogh's paintings can be seen as breaking with an illusionistic model in that it emphasises painting's materiality and construction rather than its mimetic function. The emphasis on form could thus be seen as reflexive, in the sense that reflexivity calls attention to the process by which the painting is created.

### **2.2.3 From the specific to the universal**

While calling attention to the surface of his paintings and the action that formed them, van Gogh's formal innovations<sup>29</sup> were nevertheless intended to describe or capture something lasting or essential that van Gogh locates not so much in his experience of things as in the things themselves. As George Keyes has commented, van Gogh "started with the individual and specific, and infused it with a more universal appeal" (2000: 29).

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"Father Millet" he insisted "Millet was a peasant and the son of a peasant" (Van Gogh in Auden, 1961, 351).

<sup>29</sup> In a study of the proliferation of rapid painting in late nineteenth century France, Brettell shows that rapid, unfinished aesthetic cultivated by the impressionists was not the unprecedented revolution it is often made out to be. He points to a tradition of gestural painting that runs through Titian, Tintoretto, Velázquez, Fragonard and Delacroix (among others) (2000: 28), as well as to the importance of the inspirational sketch within the academy (2000: 42); the practice of plein air painting (2000: 38); and developing photographic technology that both liberated painting from the need to record or describe and lent to the older art its cropped compositions and concern with the fleeting moment (2000: 37). However, what the Impressionists did – and Brettell sees Van Gogh as advancing their aims in this respect – (2000: 223), was take what had been peripheral or preparatory to painting (the sketch, the gestural moment) and make it central.

This “eternal”, or universal, aspect is linked, in van Gogh’s work, to a rejection of academic realism, as he expresses in a letter:

“*I should be desperate if my figures were correct [...]* I do not want them to be academically correct [...] my great longing is to learn to make those very incorrectnesses, those deviations, remodellings, changes in reality, so that they may become, yes, lies if you like– but truer than the literal truth.” July 1885 (Van Gogh in Auden 1961:244)

Often, as in the example of the sunflowers, where thin raised lines of paint could be said to seek a physical correspondence with the compacted fibres of the flowers, the particular way that paint is applied can be regarded as attempt to find an equivalence in art for the specific qualities of the subject-matter. This correspondence between the physicality of the subject and the physicality of the paint may have been what van Gogh is referring to when he writes: “When the thing represented is, in point of character, absolutely in agreement and one with the manner of representing it, isn’t it just that which gives a work of art its quality?” (Van Gogh in Auden 1961: 361).

What I have proposed as van Gogh’s formal reflexivity, his emphasis on the materiality of the medium, can thus be seen as connected to a search for, or in fact as a *pathway to* some truth that lies beyond appearances.

### **2.3. SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN VAN GOGH’S SELF- PORTRAITS**

We have seen that van Gogh’s emphasis on the formal elements of painting both brings our awareness back to the act of painting itself and attempts to recover, through exaggeration, distortion, decoration and simplification, a “truth” that was “truer than the literal truth” (Van Gogh in Auden 1961: 242-244). This particular use of the *means* of art reveals, and stems from, a similarly divided conception of the role and nature of the artistic self. This is particularly evident in van Gogh’s many self-portraits, where the self is seen on the one hand as the locus of meaning and expression, and on the other as a divided entity in need of continual reaffirmation.

### 2.3.1. The language of expression

Richard Kearney has commented that modern self-portraiture stresses the image as the expression of an individual *human* consciousness, moving away from the theo-centrism evident in, for example, a medieval religious icon (*fig. 22*) (1988: 8). Kearney uses van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Felt Hat* (*fig. 23*) as an example of a quintessential modern understanding of the role of art: the stress on a unique style, and suggests that van Gogh's "undaunted will to self-expression" bespeaks a "basic humanism" (1988: 9). Painting here moves away from the idea of mimesis and affirms art as the "autonomous *expression* of man" (1988: 9). A glance at a range of Van Gogh's self-portraits seems to bear this out. The centrality of the head and the piercing eyes seem to focus on the 'inner life' of the artist, and the serious expression creates the impression that the artist is an earnest, thoughtful person.

In these self-portraits, colour and line are employed to suggest the various nuances of this psychological self. Although the traditional head and shoulders composition remains fairly constant, there are definite, though subtle, changes in the impact of each portrait, and this is accomplished in part through the changing colour schemes. The vibrant orange-red/green-blue contrasts and the yellow and pink tones of the skin in *Self-Portrait with Straw Hat* (*fig. 24*) create an impression of vitality, while the sombre blue-grey of the background of *Self-Portrait with Felt Hat* (*fig. 25*), combined with the greyer flesh tones, creates an atmosphere of brooding lassitude. Similarly, the aureole of short, stabbing lines and dots that surround van Gogh's head in *Self-Portrait with Felt Hat* (*fig. 23*) contributes to a sense of an intense consciousness emanating from within the figure, while the network of horizontal and vertical lines in *Self-Portrait as a Painter* (*fig. 26*) create a calmer atmosphere, helping to ground the figure. Because line and colour are thus caught up in the idea of *expression*, it could be argued that they lose their effectiveness as elements that chafe against illusionism; they become naturalised as the inevitable evidence of personality or temperament. There is a sense in which the formal elements of the painting, which we can think of as the signifiers, while still imagined as corresponding to a knowable and quantifiable reality, now function as a reflection of the internal reality of the subject as opposed to a representation of the external world of



things. This would seem to support Forster's claim that expressionism "denies its own status as language" (1985: 600), claiming to act as a direct and unmediated record of the artist's emotions.

This denial of expression as a language feeds in to a particularly modernist view of the artist. The ability to access things 'directly' is seen as his special attribute and is linked to his originality: his ability to suspend convention and *see* with renewed intensity, or, as Donald Kuspit puts it, to "sense reality in all its presentational immediacy" (1993: 8). This at once separates the artist, or artistic activity, from ordinary people, or everyday life, and gives him privileged access to truth and meaning. Kuspit quotes a passage from Alfred North Whitehead that is particularly worth mentioning here. Whitehead describes the difference in the way that he (as an 'ordinary' person) and his friend the artist view a chair: while he precedes straight from a perception of a coloured shape to the conclusion that it is a chair and to a desire to sit down in it, his artist friend is able to suspend what Kuspit calls "society's symbol system" (1993: 8) and contemplate the aesthetic dimension of the chair. Whitehead's example captures the modernist tendency to deny the extent to which the aesthetics of the chair is as steeped in a symbolic system as its functionally, and thus to accord to the artist a special ability to *see* (and by implication, to *be* or live) in a uniquely authentic way. Through his painting, the expressive artist is able to communicate this authenticity to the viewer, enabling him or her to see and feel authentically and immediately with him, however briefly (Kuspit 1993: 3).

This view of the modern artist as authentic has implications for van Gogh's reflexivity: formal innovation becomes the mark of originality, and acts to promote the idea that art can express a truer-than-the-literal truth. Van Gogh's reflexive use of the formal properties of his medium thus *reaffirms*, or renews, a belief in art's ability to convey truth and meaning. Van Gogh's self portraits can be seen as the attempt of the artistic subject to "express" itself through the free-ing of painting from its strictly naturalistic or descriptive function. In this way van Gogh's painting links to Derrida's first model of reflexivity in which the subject turns back on itself an attempt to grasp itself or gain self-knowledge.

### 2.3.2 The unsettled self: performance as reflexivity

Speaking of self-knowledge– who has it? –Van Gogh, 1885, in a letter to Anthon van Rappard (in Auden, 1960:245)

However, there is also a sense in which van Gogh's self-portraits operate to unsettle the equation of self-representation with self-knowledge. His frequent return to himself as a subject in itself suggests the self as a fascinatingly unstable and ultimately elusive entity. His compulsive practice of self-representation and accompanying reification of the self points to the fundamental instability or fragmented nature of the self, which needs, as Pollock suggests, to be continually inscribed in the world, either through metaphors of space and architecture as a type of "housing" for the self, or through the "spectral double" of self-portraiture (2004: 9).

One could also say that van Gogh recognises the depiction of himself as something of a performance. Describing his *Self-Portrait as Bonze* (fig. 27) he remarks, "I also exaggerate my personality" (in Sund 2002: 226). Similarly, the different costumes he chooses to present himself in point to different aspects of his identity<sup>30</sup>. In *Self-Portrait* (fig. 28) he portrays himself wearing a blue peasant's shirt and a straw hat. In *Self-Portrait with a Dark Felt Hat* (fig. 29), he is more of a bourgeois businessman. In his *Self-Portrait Dedicated as Bonze* (fig. 27), he portrays his hair as closely cropped and his eyes as narrow and slanted, appearing almost Asian. These various identities are all expressions of important parts of his identity, both as a person and as an artist. His peasant attire and Japanese references point to his desire to be identified with the simplicity and 'honesty' he associated in his letters with rural life and Japanese culture. Likewise, in his writing he presents himself as possessed of an analytical, rational mind, remarking to his brother that they shared a "liking for looking behind the scenes in a theatre" and were both "inclined to analyse things" (Van Gogh in Auden 1960: 120). He then remarks that "[i]t is, I believe, exactly the quality which one needs for painting" (Van Gogh in Auden 1960: 120). This focus on the analytical intellect comes through

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<sup>30</sup> A comparison to Rembrandt's self-portraiture is illuminating- while Rembrandt used costumes in a more overtly theatrical way, immersing himself in the role he is playing in *Self-Portrait as a Beggar* (fig.32), van Gogh's play with identity is more subtle: he seems to be trying to tease out aspects of what he sees as his own personality rather than to take on radically different roles.

clearly in van Gogh's painted self-representations through the centrality of the head and the eyes. What his variety of self-representations show is that the self is presented as something that is continually changing. Though the expression on his face and the angle from which he paints himself is relatively constant, it is difficult to recognise at first glance that these are all the same person.

It is apparent both from his remark in his letter and from the paintings themselves, that van Gogh was aware that the 'reality' of the self was not only something that he strove to convey through formal innovation, but was also somewhat fluid, or malleable, continually created by the very representations that seek to uncover it. His work can thus be said to display a self-conscious (although by no means parodic or ironic) awareness of the performativity of identity.

Although this may in part be attributed to a biographical knowledge of van Gogh that is difficult to escape due to his larger-than-life reputation, the sense of self conveyed in van Gogh's self-portraits appears to be one of the self in perpetual crisis. The staring eyes and the set mouth that confront us in *Self-Portrait as a Painter* (fig. 26) combine with the ashen tones of the face and the restless strokes of the brush to convey a sense of suppressed turbulence present in many of his self-portraits, and perhaps most explicit in his *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (fig. 30). The bandage, which attracts attention even while concealing, suggests a self that is wounded, seeking self-knowledge through representation precisely because of this woundedness.

## **2.4. CONCLUSION**

The anti-illusionistic effects of the emphasis on form in van Gogh's paintings, as we have seen, can be partly recuperated at a psychological level as a language of expression that suppresses its own status as language through the proposition that loosening form from its descriptive moorings freed it to better mirror psychological reality. However, although this is a powerful argument, it does not detract from the fact that the attention to form remains a constant reminder of the painting's status as a *painting*, as art. Rather, these two impulses – the desire to foreground the materiality of the medium and the

process of painting, and the drive to see this emphasis on form as an expanded type of realism – reinforce each other. In this way, van Gogh's paintings can be said to reflect upon their own means of construction in order to renew their ability to convey 'truth'. Thus they are reflexive in a way consistent with the modernist model proposed in chapter one.

The drive to image the unique, individual self – whether by imaging it directly or by stressing a personal, subjective vision of the external world of things – is also, however, inhabited by something like a sense of failure. The very moment that the interior self comes under scrutiny is the moment when it becomes most elusive. The moment when it reaches for the power of self-expression is the moment when it appears most vulnerable and under threat. The repeated attempt to secure the psychological or internal self as what Derrida calls the a "centre" – a fixed and immutable truth that gives meaning and relevance to experience – in fact points to the shifting, evasive nature of this centre. Van Gogh's search for a central, universal truth *through* reflexivity is thus unsettled *by* reflexivity, producing in the viewer, if not the artist, a feeling of unease that would be further, and more consciously, developed by later modernists.

## CHAPTER THREE:

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### THE PATTERN BEHIND THE COTTON WOOL: REFLEXIVITY IN THE WRITING OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

#### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

One of the visitors to the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition in London was the novelist Virginia Woolf. Woolf saw the exhibition as providing a visual expression of an era of change she felt herself to be participating in (Goldman 2000: 112). The aesthetic experimentation evident in Virginia Woolf's writing, which has been described as "a turning away from the direct modes of representation towards greater abstraction, aesthetic impersonality and self-reflexivity" (Parsons 2007: 11), and which can also be read as a form of psychological realism, can thus be seen as a response to a Realist literary tradition, analogous to the reaction of the Post-Impressionists to the realist/naturalist imperative in art. Like the type of reflexivity I have located in van Gogh's paintings, both formal and thematic reflexivity in Woolf are in advanced as ways to access truth and meaning. However, in Woolf's work, this is accompanied by a sense of doubt about the ability of language to communicate that seems more conscious, and more ironic, than the current of unease that underlies van Gogh's self-examination.

The type of reflexivity that I will argue is particularly present in Woolf's short story *Solid Objects* (1944) and her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), can be located both in her formal experimentation and in what we could call thematic reflexivity – the inclusion of an artist-figure who facilitates an explicit exploration of the role of art and the artist. I will look first at the ways in which Woolf's narrative voice can be considered reflexive, focusing primarily on a paragraph from one of her short stories; then at the mirroring of the author that takes place through the character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* and finally at Woolf's take on the search for meaning which accompanies the Derridean model of reflexivity I have been associating with modern texts. As this chapter will show, Woolf's particular mode of reflexivity resonates with both types of reflexivity

proposed by Derrida, in that, while her text's examination of the role of art recuperates the idea of truth and closure at a formal level, it does so in an ambivalent way.

### **3.2. NARRATIVE VOICE**

Feminist critic Toril Moi has suggested that Woolf practices a form of writing that "engages with and thereby exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse" (1985: 44). Whereas Anglo-American Woolf-criticism, epitomised for Moi by Elaine Showalter, tends to regard Woolf's stylistic innovations as distractions or irritations, Moi turns to Derridean criticism in order to identify Woolf with a questioning of the "firm position from which we judge the world", located precisely in the *way* that she writes (*ibid*). Woolf's modernism, for Moi, is a form of deconstruction (*ibid*).

Moi's linking of Derridean deconstruction with the techniques of literary modernism points to an interesting tension in Woolf's textual practice. While her use of a shifting, multiple authorial perspective can, like van Gogh's emphasis on the subjectivity of vision, be seen as a newly expanded realism, I also want to suggest that these characteristics are reflexive in a way that resists rehabilitation on these grounds.

#### **3.2.1. Shifts in perspective**

The only thing that moved upon the vast semi-circle of the beach was one small black spot (Woolf 1944: 35).

With these words Virginia Woolf opens her short story, *Solid Objects*. Immediately, dramatic tension is created by the contrast of the enormity and stillness of the beach with the motion of the mysterious "black spot". But while we are lured in to the story by such devices, we are also held at a distance. The vastness of the beach positions the reader far above the "one black spot", but in her second sentence this position changes:

As it came nearer to the ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat, it became apparent from certain tenuity in its blackness that this spot possessed four legs; and moment by moment it became more unmistakable that it was composed of the persons of two young men. (Woolf 1944: 35).

First, the “vast semi-circle” is replaced by a description of the boat that implies a much closer vantage point. Next, the solidity of the spot separates gradually into “the persons of two young men”. By shifting the perspective in this way, Woolf gives us the sense of being gradually drawn into the story as more detail is given about her protagonists.

At the same time as Woolf draws us into this story, she also makes visible the mechanisms that allow this suspension of disbelief. The information given in the second sentence, to the effect that the spot was actually two people walking on the beach, is presented as a gradual realisation: “it became apparent”, “moment by moment it became more unmistakable”. Because of this, at the same time as we become aware of the two young men, we also become aware that they are being seen. We are simultaneously made aware of both the subject and the gaze that apprehends it.

But who is watching them? To whom do things “become apparent” and “more and more unmistakable”? In his essay on “Narration and Fiction” in Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*, John Mepham raises a similar question. Mepham examines Woolf’s description of a slight action of Mrs. Ramsay’s:

Mrs. Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy... (1927: 52)

Observing that “in this passage the attributive verb, ‘seemed’, floats free”, Mepham asks the question, “To whom did Mrs. Ramsay seem thus?” (1993: 42). The only character in the room with Mrs. Ramsay is her six year old son James, and Mepham expressed doubt that Woolf is really attributing such a complex perception to him (*ibid*).

He resolves the difficulty by saying the narration here is articulating James’ half formed, “subterranean”<sup>31</sup> thoughts, giving “expression in its own words to what is for him too dense a feeling to be captured in words” (*ibid*).

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<sup>31</sup> “Subterranean” is a word used by James Joyce to describe the currents of consciousness that run beneath everyday life. “Our object” he maintained, “is to create a new fusion between the exterior world and our contemporary selves, and also to enlarge our vocabulary of the subconscious as Proust has done. We believe that it is in the abnormal that we approach closer to reality” (Joyce

In *Solid Objects*, however, we are told from the outset that the two young men were the “only thing that moved” on the beach and nowhere in the story is another character introduced to whom we could attribute these observations. In the absence of an observing consciousness within the story, these free-floating attributive verbs seem to strain outwards, reaching for a consciousness outside the fictional space. What they encounter, and link together, are two such observing minds: that of the author, and that of reader.

If it is to the author that things become progressively clearer, it is almost as if we are being taken inside Woolf’s mind as she creates, seeing as if with her imagination how characters emerge from vagueness and obscurity and begin to take definite shape. Seeing the story develop thus, the reader’s imagination is engaged in a process of discovery seemingly parallel to the author’s creation. Although it would be simplistic to assume that the unfolding of these sentences reflect in any direct or uncomplicated way the working of Woolf’s mind, and to overlook the layers of thinking, patterning and reworking that are arguably characteristic of Woolf’s fiction, the opening lines of this story nevertheless suggest a link between the reader’s knowledge and the author’s knowledge. Both the reader and the writer appear to be slowly gaining access to the characters simultaneously, calling attention to the text’s status as a fictional construct and to the presence of an inventing narrator behind it.

Significantly, the author’s knowledge is not presented as absolute or unqualified. Although Woolf’s description of the intimate thoughts of the characters, particularly John, later in the story, would seem to indicate that her authorial powers of observation are unlimited<sup>32</sup>, the shifts in perspective remind us that the characters and events in her book are made up: they are fictional creations whose existence is not independent of her own thoughts, but rather co-extensive with her imagination.

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in Parsons, 2007:46). Parsons describes Woolf as likewise “concerned with how to grasp and communicate a quality of existence that she argued must be beneath the surface consciousness of the mind” (2007:80).

32 Having come into view, one of the young men, who we learn is called John, sits down on the sand and begins to burrow his fingers down into the sand. As he does this, Woolf tells us that “he remembered that, after digging for a while, the water oozes round your finger-tips; the hole then becomes a moat; a well; a spring; a secret channel to the sea.” This description of his thoughts implies that Woolf has access to the inner workings as well as the outward actions, of her characters (Woolf 1944:36).



Because shifts in the authorial perspective in the opening lines of *Solid Objects* make this perspective visible, they indicate the presence of an author in a subtle yet pervasive way, revealing the fictional nature of the characters and situations. In this way, the opening sentences of *Solid Objects* contain a reflexive element: while they create a detailed illusionistic world they also refer back to the constructed nature of this world.

### 3.2.2. Multiple perspectives

In much of Woolf's fiction, the authorial perspective is not only mobile, shifting from sweeping to detailed perspectives, it is also multiple. In both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the story is told from the point of view of different characters. The manner in which the characters' thoughts are rendered is examined at length in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*<sup>33</sup>. Auerbach makes a distinction between the author and what is now often called the "narrative voice" or "narrative consciousness" that the author uses to describe her characters and their impressions. Examining a passage from *To the Lighthouse*, Auerbach looks closely at "who is speaking", and concludes that Woolf has almost entirely abandoned the usual omniscient position of the narrator and is presenting the world of her novel from the viewpoints of her characters (1953: 534). "The writer of objective facts," he notes, "has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatic personae" (*ibid*). Although he acknowledges that there had been attempts by earlier novelists to show reality as perceived by the individual, these were mostly from the viewpoint of one, usually quite unusual, character. Woolf's portrayal of the consciousness of many characters differentiates her writing from what he calls "unipersonal subjectivism" (*ibid*), in that it constitutes an examination of reality from multiple viewpoints, each given a certain validity or sympathy that Jane Austen, for example, grants only to a privileged few.

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<sup>33</sup> Although Auerbach's study was published in 1953, his insights are worth repeating, as much of what has subsequently been written about Woolf's narrative style builds on his interpretation.

Woolf's technical experimentation has also been linked to the awareness that the perspective from which life is portrayed is invariably a gendered one. Her frequent use of long, flowing sentences were linked at the time to a "feminine" way of writing (Parsons 2007: 96).<sup>34</sup> As well as associating certain stylistic characteristics with "femininity", Woolf was also concerned with writing about woman's experience. A woman's sentence, as opposed to a feminine sentence, spoke about woman's experience from a woman's perspective, and only a woman could do this.<sup>35</sup> For Showalter, Woolf's aesthetics are inescapably linked to her idea of literary androgyny (1977: 24), and the idea that the novel should be written without an overly self-conscious awareness of one's own gender<sup>36</sup> is seen as a flight from her proposed feminism (1977: 25). For Moi, it is precisely the "sportive, sensual" way that Woolf writes, her "playful shifts and changes in perspective" that act to undo patriarchal ideology's underlying essentialism (1985:44).

Woolf's writing also acknowledges that economic status influenced the perception of reality. For example, the character of Charles Tansley in *To the Lighthouse* is shown to be uncomfortably aware of his shabby clothes and his poor background. The impact of his poverty on the way he sees the world is indicated by the bitter tone the narrative voice adopts when seeing events through his eyes: "He has to make things last twice the length other people did; he smoked the cheapest tobacco; shag; the same the old men smoked on the quays" (Woolf 1927: 18). Similarly, Auerbach has linked Woolf's multiplicity of viewpoints and her focus on ordinary moments in the lives of ordinary people, "the things which all men have in common" (Auerbach 1953: 552), to a kind of anti-elitism that is

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34 Such writing could be written by a man or a woman and the work of James Joyce was often described in this way. The association of this experimental literary style with "femininity" has met with mixed reactions. While some critics feel that it is a positive association, "reversing the dominant ideological hierarchy", others feel that it runs the risk of perpetuating and further naturalising the already entrenched cultural associations (Parsons 2007: 96).

35 Although Woolf embraced a "feminine" style of writing, she also upheld the ideal of the author as "androgynous". In *To the Lighthouse*, when Lily Briscoe is painting, she is described as "subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general", and "becoming once more under the power" of her "vision" (Woolf 1927: 73). Lily can thus be seen as an expression of Woolf's view in *A Room of One's Own* that although it is important to write as a woman, it is even more important to write as an artist. In keeping with her demand that modern fiction "be written standing back from life", Woolf suggested that being overly conscious of one's gender while writing would only hamper the process.

36 In *Modern Fiction*, Woolf wrote that the new fiction should be written "standing back from life" (Woolf in Parsons, 2007:3).

perhaps difficult to appreciate now, at a time when her work has become part of the canon.

Broader communal concerns such as economic and gender identity are thus not separate from Woolf's technical innovations. Rather these innovations suggest that 'reality', 'life', and human beings, are inescapably multifaceted, and that our knowledge, both of the world, and of each other, is inescapably subjective, inescapably knowledge from a particular perspective.

### 3.3.3 Subjective Reality

Woolf, in departing from the traditional omniscient stance of the narrator, was not by any means abandoning the attempt to portray reality. In fact it could be seen, as it is by Auerbach, as an attempt to "fathom a more genuine, a deeper, and indeed a more real reality" (1953: 540).

In her review *Modern Fiction*, Woolf wrote:

Life is not a series of gig-lamps systematically arranged, life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist, to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little admixture of the alien and the external as possible? (Woolf in Parsons 2007: 45)

As in the case of van Gogh, it is thus possible to see these reflexive elements as a renewed attempt at capturing, as Auerbach puts it, "nothing less than the wealth of reality and the depth of life in every moment" (1953: 552). In the same way that reading van Gogh as an expressionist naturalises his concern with surface, a focus on Woolf's modernism as a deepened realism potentially stops her play with language from chafing against the illusion she creates.

Early receptions of Woolf, Su Reid tells us, found her writing "poetic", rather than "realistic" (1993: 1). More recent critics have seen Woolf's challenge to the conventions of literary Realism as intimately connected with the perception that reality itself is multifaceted and that there is no one, natural or inevitable center from which we can

impose coherence on it (Moi 1985, Parsons 2000). Seen in this way, Woolf's "realism" paradoxically ties in with a Derridean affirmation of freeplay, as it actively foregrounds the workings of the mind from a position that is continually shifting. Her textual practice is a good example of what Foucault means when he talks about the return of "language" in the early twentieth century (1966: 305). The "enigmatic multiplicity" (1966: 305) that Foucault sees as marking the return of an emphasis on the constructive or creative role of language is evident in the way Woolf uses words and in her exploration of the subjective, psychological point of view.

However, although Woolf's review of *Modern Fiction* has often been read as a statement of her own artistic intentions, as Parson's points out, Woolf was ultimately also critical of the new "psychological" realism with which she is often identified, particularly of what she referred to as the "unrelenting egoism" of James Joyce's writing (Woolf in Parsons 2007: 48). His portrayal of consciousness, Woolf wrote, was one in which the individual mind "never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond" (Woolf in Parsons 2007: 50). She found, in the very self-reflexive prose that questioned traditional realist writing, a kind of narcissism that portrayed human consciousness as if it existed in a vacuum (Parsons 2007: 48). While her own writing does explore consciousness and how it responds to external stimuli, the interface between the individual and society is also addressed. *Mrs. Dalloway* in particular explores the way that individual consciousness is shaped by forces outside of itself. As Parsons writes, "the intensity of moments in which the mystery of character is briefly overcome and a connection between self and world is achieved, becomes one of the key features of her re-definition of reality in the novel" (Parsons, 2007: 52). Woolf's exploration of subjectivity and her psychological focus can thus also be seen as *complicating* the attempt to express reality through the lens of a unified and innate subjectivity.

### **3.3.MISE-EN-ABYME: THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST IN *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE***

It is not only through the use of floating attributive verbs and shifting multiple viewpoints that Woolf's writing refers back to process of its creation. *To the Lighthouse*, arguably

Woolf's most transparently autobiographical work (Drabble 1992: 12), is also reflexive in that both the products and the process of creative activity are recurrent themes. Mr. Ramsay, for example, recites poetry to himself as he paces around the garden, is himself a writer of philosophy, and reads Sir Walter Scott after dinner (which ends with the recitation of poetry), while Mrs. Ramsay reads Shakespeare. Creativity is as present in the domestic sphere: the dinner is referred to as a culinary "masterpiece", attention is drawn to the arrangement of a bowl of fruit, and Mrs. Ramsay creates social harmony and domestic order. However, it is in Lily Briscoe, one of the central characters of the novel, to whose thoughts we are given extensive access, that the most sustained and overt commentary on artistic creation is found. As an artist, I will argue, Lily functions as a mirror, a type of *mise-en-abyme*, that reflects Woolf's own artistic concerns, and her painting functions as a mirror for the novel. Woolf's thematic reflexivity, I will suggest, like her play with shifting, multiple perspectives, is particularly modernist, but can also be seen to prefigure the concerns, if not the mode, of postmodern reflexivity.

### **3.3.1. Lily and her painting as a mirror for Woolf and her novel**

The figure of the artist that Woolf presents us with is not one of a secure and confident creator who is in control of meaning. We are presented instead with a somewhat prosaic spinster, for whom the activity of painting is fraught with difficulty. It is in the exploration of this struggle, rather than in obvious biographical parallels, that Lily can be said to serve as a mirror for the author.

This can be clearly seen in the way that Lily's fears about the reception and future of her paintings echoes Woolf's preoccupation with the perishability of fame (Drabble, 1992, xvii). When Lily thinks of the future of her paintings, it is only to think how they will be "hung in the attics" (Woolf 1927: 281); how they will be stored underneath beds in servants quarters, how they will "be destroyed" (*ibid*).

It is also visible in the way that, for Lily, the process of painting is fraught with difficulties. When she begins to paint, fears and doubts set upon her, making "the passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child"

(Woolf 1927: 27). These are the doubts, Woolf implies, that accompany the risk of making a picture that does not conform to what is popular at the time. Earlier in this passage Woolf contrasts the bright colours that Lily sees with the convention made fashionable by the fictitious Mr. Paunceforte:

The jacaranda was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and staring white, since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mr. Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent (Woolf 1927: 27).

Lily is not only plagued by fears about the reception and future of her work. The act of painting also brings up insecurities about her social standing and her right to be taken seriously as an artist: "it was then, too, in that chill and windy way, as she began to paint, that there forced themselves upon her other things, her own inadequacy, her insignificance, keeping house for her father off the Brompton road" (Woolf 1927: 28). When she returns from her walk and looks again at her picture we also hear how the academic Charles Tansley's words "women can't write, women can't paint" echo in her ears (Woolf 1927: 67). These struggles are reminiscent of the doubts that Virginia Woolf expressed in her diary about *To the Lighthouse*, fearing that it would be called sentimental (Abel 1993: 113). Lily's battle against the echo of Tansley's words recalls Woolf's assertion in her non-fictional writing that women authors were faced by prejudice of this kind.<sup>37</sup>

Lily's attempt to preserve the integrity of her "vision" parallels Woolf's desire to find a way of writing that resonates with her own experience of life. However, although Lily is trying to capture "what she sees", her painting is not at all "realistic" in the conventional sense. She describes it instead in formal, abstract terms of balance and composition, of

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<sup>37</sup> In *A Room of One's Own, Woman and Fiction and Professions for Women*, Woolf addresses the cultural expectations and economic restraints that impact on women's writing. In order to write, Woolf maintained, women needed to be financially independent and to have access to the same education as men. Also, they needed to be free to break with the gender stereotype Woolf described as the "angel of the house". The "angel of the house" was the ultimate self-sacrificing woman, who always put herself last. "If there was a draught she sat in it, if there was chicken she took the leg" (Parsons 2007:59). She spends her life in the service of others without ever developing her own opinions or values, and is deadly to woman's creative expression: "If I had not killed her, she would have killed me", Woolf wrote in *Professions for Women* (Parsons 2007:59). Lily shares with Woolf the reluctance to automatically assume certain roles traditionally ascribed to her gender. At dinner she feels pressure from Mrs. Ramsay to be polite and sociable to Charles Tansley, to draw him into the conversation and make him feel appreciated. Although she eventually complies, she feels that she has been dishonest: "She had done the usual trick – been nice", but "[s]he had not been sincere" (Woolf 1927: 125).

“a light here” needing “a shadow there” and of the relation between two masses. She also does not hesitate to invent (Woolf 1927: 73). Although earlier she would not have thought it honest to change the “bright violet” and “staring white” by thinning out the colours, throughout supper that evening she reminds herself how she must move the tree a little to the left (Woolf 1927:115, 117).<sup>38</sup>

The tension that runs between the urgent need to express what one sees, to get as “close” to life as possible, and, by standing back from it, to shape it into art, to compose and somehow subdue it, is as evident in Woolf’s own artistic practice as in Lily’s<sup>39</sup>. While still being concerned with capturing everyday experience as closely as possible, Woolf maintained that the new novel must be written “standing back from life” (Woolf in Parsons 2007: 3). This combination of closeness and distance, objectivity and observation, is expressed through the imagery that is used to describe the way that Lily sees her subject. “She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral” (Woolf 1927: 67). There is a desire to simultaneously capture the subtle nuances of experience and to order and structure those observations.

Lily can thus be seen as a vehicle for the expression of Woolf’s own concerns as an artist. The doubts and struggles Lily experience function to valorise her own (and by extension, Woolf’s) artistic practice, coding it as “honest” and hard-won. Whereas Mr. Ramsay’s open display of his doubts and insecurities make him a slightly ridiculous figure, the novel is arguably relatively sympathetic towards Lily’s private and internal struggle. Lily’s doubts, fueled by Charles Tansley’s prejudices and her own feelings of social insignificance, are presented as serious, in contrast to the slightly mocking distance with which Mr. Ramsay is treated. When Mr. Ramsay’s quest for understanding is likened to

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38 Lily’s thoughts about how to solve the composition of her painting are intimately connected to her feelings about men and marriage. When she looks at the sprig on the tablecloth, she thinks of her painting and connects the two in her mind, so that when her eye catches the sprig again she remembers her painting. Her work serves here as a solid point for her to hold onto when she feels herself criticised by Charles Tansley or when she feels insignificant beside Minta Doyle’s beauty (138).

39 John Mepham has written, “...the telling of a story has a purpose, a purpose which is prior to and independent of the fiction itself” (1993:33). Mepham goes on to relate this purpose to the ordering or shaping power that speaking, or writing, has over experience.

that of an arctic explorer (Woolf 1927: 48), to the leader of a “Verloren Hoop” (*ibid*) or to a stake in a channel that marks where the rocks are (*ibid*), there is an obvious element of satire present. The exposure of Mr. Ramsay’s habit of taking a perverse pleasure in stating unpleasant truths (Woolf 1927: 45), of continually relying on others for “sympathy” and constantly needing “someone to tell the story of his suffering to” (Woolf 1927: 51) mocks the kind of heroism to which he aspires, and perhaps even possesses<sup>40</sup>. Lily’s insecurities, however, are only ever internally expressed, and by highlighting the difficulties of realizing her “vision”, serve to emphasise her “courage” (Woolf 1927: 28).

### 3.3.2. One could not say what one meant

Lily is not only courageous because she fights against social prejudice and personal insecurity. Through her eyes, there is also an acknowledgement of the difficulties, the seeming impossibilities, of expressing oneself clearly through representation. While Lily can “see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked” (Woolf 1927: 28), there is also, as we have seen, a tremendous sense of difficulty when it comes to translating that vision into substance. Lily’s frustration with painting as a representational medium extends to verbal language, which is similarly incapable of conveying thought completely. Wanting to express a feeling that rises up in her towards Mrs. Ramsay and everything she represents to her, and dissatisfied with the words “I’m in love with you” (Woolf 1927: 28), she tries a new version: “I’m in love with all this” (*ibid*), but this is no better. The narrative voice concludes on her behalf that “It was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant” (*ibid*).

Towards the end of the novel, when Lily is completing her painting, she again evinces dissatisfaction with the ability of thoughts, or of artistic endeavour, to get at the truth:

[i]t was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the crucial moment; heroically, one must force it on. (Woolf 1927: 261)

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<sup>40</sup> Although the Mr. Ramsay is perceived by his children as a “tyrant”, and Lily is contemptuous or resentful of his need for sympathy, we also see through Lily’s eyes how he “looked like a king in exile” (Woolf 1927: 201), and at dinner Mrs. Ramsay wishes her husband would speak, “[f]or if he said a thing, it would make all the difference. He went to the heart of things” (Woolf 1927: 128). For all his melodrama, Mr. Ramsay is still able to command a certain respect and admiration from those around him.



At intervals in her painting, Lily feels the urge to wake Mr. Carmichael and ask him to help her answer her question about the meaning of it all (Woolf 1927: 230, 240), but refrains because she feels her questions to be inexpressible:

no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low (Woolf 1927: 240).

In this way Woolf highlights the inability of language to convey meaning transparently, and can be seen to prefigure postmodern reflexive texts' problematisation of the relationship between language, or representation, and meaning. However, although Woolf suggests that both painting and verbal language are inadequate to the "expression" of external and internal reality, *To the Lighthouse* equally advances the modern claim that it is precisely in poetic, or artistic language that "meaning" is most satisfyingly found.

Moi relates Woolf's "sportive, sensual" use of language and her exploration of multiple viewpoints and meanings to the way Derrida understood language to be "structured as an endless deferral of meaning" and maintains that, in Woolf's novel "any search for an essential, absolute, stable meaning must therefore be considered metaphysical" (1985: 87).

While Woolf certainly parodies the search for absolute meaning through a linear use of logic by presenting thought as an alphabet with Mr. Ramsay, the great philosopher, stuck at Q and fearing that R is beyond him (Woolf 1927: 47-48), the question that Lily asks at the beginning of the third section of the novel, "What does it mean then, what can it all mean?" (Woolf 1927: 197) is definitely not dismissed as futile, and this is where Woolf's reflexivity differs from the post-structuralist sense of problematised referentiality. Whereas post-structuralist thinkers have abandoned this question as too large to address with any certainty, it is asked throughout Woolf's novel with urgency and gravity, and although no clear answer is ever given, there is an attempt to address this question through the use of symbolism and imagery.

In the first section of the novel, while Mr. Ramsay searches for meaning through philosophy, Lily struggles to make sense of things through her art. Through Lily's eyes,

we see that both art and philosophy involve a paring down, an attempt to get at essences. According to Lily, Mr. Ramsay passes his time engaged in the “seeing of angular essences, (the) reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white deal four legged table” (the table having come to symbolise Mr. Ramsay’s philosophical work in Lily’s mind) (Woolf 1927:34). Similarly, her own picture “reduces” Mrs. Ramsay and James to “a triangular purple shape” (Woolf 1927: 72).

On a more personal level, Mrs. Ramsay questions the meaning of her own life, asking herself as she sits down at the head of the table “But what have I done with my life?” (Woolf 1927: 112) and William Bankes is conscious that his attempts to weigh up the value of Mr. Ramsay’s life and work, and of their friendship, is part of a re-evaluating of his own life (Woolf 1927: 31). The search for meaning in art, philosophy and human relations is, in this section, active and open-ended.

In *Time Passes*, a sense of disillusionment accompanies this search. As Howard Harper puts it, “the narrative discovers that nature mocks the search for meaning” (1982: 46). In the first section, when the guests go to look at the waves after dinner, it is with a “childlike” (Woolf 1927: 157) air of excitement and anticipation. Now, however:

...those who had gone down to pace the beach and ask of the sea and sky what messages they reported or what visions they affirmed had to consider among the usual tokens of divine bounty - the sunset on the sea, the pallor of the dawn, the moon rising, fishing boats against the moon, and children pelting each other with handfuls of grass, something out of harmony with this jocundity, this serenity. There was the silent apparition of the ashen coloured ship, for instance, come, gone; there was a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath (Woolf 1927: 182).

The war-ship and the oil spill, associated with the war and the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue and Andrew, disturb the sense of harmony with the environment that is arguably present in part one and make it difficult to continue to “marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within”(Woolf 1927: 182). If the title of part one, *The Window*, evokes the idea of access to truth, albeit mediated and difficult, in *Time Passes* “contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken” (Woolf 1927: 183). The realist metaphor of art

as a window onto the world, or a mirror that faithfully reflects it, is thus explicitly discarded.

However, mentioned in brackets after this assertion is the fact that “Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry” (Woolf 1927: 183). This sudden awakening of an interest in poetry in the wake of the war can be likened to the literary experimentation of the interwar years, and, while it could be read as a kind of narcissistic retreat from reality, the turn to poetry can also be interpreted, as it is by Harper, as a way of facing disaster and change. “Only the poet”, he understands Woolf as saying “can look on the face of chaos” (1982: 48).

This brief mention of poetry is developed and sustained in section III, *The lighthouse*. This section opens with Lily’s words “What does it mean then, what can it all mean?” (Woolf 1927: 197) in a return to the theme of a quest for meaning. It is significant that it is Lily who asks this question most directly, as it is also arguably through her that it is most resolved.

It is also significant here that Lily is a painter, not a writer. Commenting on the particularly visual way that Woolf writes, Winifred Holtby observes: “To let the perspective shift from high to low, from huge to microscopic, to let figures of people, insects, aeroplanes, flow past across the vision and melt away- these are devices common enough to another form of art. These are the tricks of the cinema” (Parsons 2007: 51). Similarly, as Jane Goldman comments in her extensive examination of the relationship between Woolf’s writing and Post-impressionist painting, Woolf herself “strongly equates writing with painting”, quoting Woolf’s statement that “All great writers are colourists [...]; they always contrive to make their scenes glow and darken and change to the eye” (Goldman 1998: 114). Woolf’s emphasis on the visual aspects of experience can be found in abundance in *To the Lighthouse*, for example in descriptions of the surroundings:

[i]t was bright enough, the grass still a soft deep green, the house starred in its greenery with purple passion flowers, and rooks dropping cool cries from the high

blue. But something moves, flashed, turned a silver wing in the air (Woolf 1927: 28-9).

as well as in the way that complex thoughts of characters are shown to be connected to a visual image, as in Lily's connection of Mr. Ramsay's work with a table, or Mrs. Ramsay's identification with the light from the lighthouse:

[p]ausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the things she looked at (Woolf 1927: 86).

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault speaks about the differences between thought and language, saying that, because language is essentially linear, it necessarily orders thought into a sequence, presenting one thing after another (1966: 201). Whereas we can only say things one at a time, thoughts are more like pictures. On a related note, the philosopher Bertrand Russell cautioned against the assumption that language can directly "mirror" the "structure of the world" (Parsons 2007:73). In *Analysis of the Mind* he writes "against such errors the only safeguard is to be able, once in a way, to discard words for a moment and contemplate facts more directly through images" (Parsons 2007:73). Woolf can be seen as using 'pictorial' language in a way that highlights, and attempts to overcome, the inadequacy of 'transparent' language.

This use of 'artistic' language is related to the way that Lily's painting can be seen to mirror the elegiac function of *To the Lighthouse*. Just as *To the Lighthouse* can be read as an elegy for Woolf's deceased parents, half-brother Thoby and half-sister Stella, as well as for her childhood<sup>41</sup>, Lily's painting of Mrs. Ramsay is linked to Lily's mourning of her. As Lily completes her painting, she re-works her store of collected impressions of Mrs. Ramsay, coming to terms with what Mrs. Ramsay had meant to her and who she had been.

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41 Two years before *To the Lighthouse* was published, Woolf wrote in her diary, "I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel'. A new – by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?" (Woolf in Drabble 1994:12). After the work was complete she wrote: "when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her" (Woolf 1939:81).

The book ends with Mr. Carmichael, the poet, waking up, and Lily, the artist, completing her picture, in a passage that connects the novels elegiac function to the artistic or poetic closure:

They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything. He stood there spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind; she thought he was surveying, tolerantly, compassionately, their final destiny. Now he has crowned the occasion, she thought, when his hand slowly fell, as if she had seen him let fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth.

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvass. There is was- her picture. Yes, with all its blues and greens, its attempts at something. It would be hung in attics, she thought, it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvass; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision (Woolf 1927: 281).

Woolf's novel thus suggests that it is in the realm of imagery and artistry, despite their perishability, that meaning and closure are most satisfyingly found.

## **1.4 CONCLUSION**

Although Woolf's reflexivity complicates the idea of language providing transparent *access* to truth, like van Gogh, she believes, if not in exactly in truth, at least in moments of clarity where language is able to elucidate experience. In a sketch of the past, she describes her writing process as an approach to the structure of life:

I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from some enemy behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become part of a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing beyond appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together [...] From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool there is a pattern; that we- I mean all human beings- are connected to this; that the whole world is a work of art, and we are parts of the world of art (Woolf 1939: 72).

“Behind the cotton wool is a pattern”. This passage creates the impression that, through the use of reason and language, Woolf attempts to discover the underlying cause of events and to make clear the pattern of life, which she then expresses in writing. This would seem to contradict assertions that her writing complicates the idea of access to truth through representation. How can we reconcile this search for an underlying order with the skepticism about the ability of words to “say what one means”? Perhaps key to this apparent paradox is the emphasis on the creative power of language.

“It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole” is an acknowledgment that speaking and writing actively create order and coherence.<sup>42</sup>

Woolf, like van Gogh, can be seen as practicing a particularly modernist form of reflexivity, which facilitates engagement with societal issues, as well as questioning received notions about the ability of representation to transparently and objectively describe a single, coherent ‘reality’. However, Woolf’s reflexivity differs from van Gogh’s in that the search for meaning or order, as we have seen, is accompanied by an explicit and recurrent emphasis on the limitations of representation, as well as by the shifting, multiple perspectives, of her “sportive, sensual” (Moi 1985: 44) prose, which point to the fluidity of meaning in a way that can be seen to prefigure the Derridean freeplay of postmodern texts.

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42        However, the order and coherence of *To The Lighthouse* is very different both from that of nineteenth novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, or *Great Expectations*, and from early twentieth century novels such as *A Passage to India*, or *Sons and Lovers* and can be compared with the cyclical order of T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Wasteland”. Composed as it is from fragments of dialogue quoted verbatim and literary borrowings and allusions, “The Wasteland” seems at first reading to have no logical structure. The phrase “I can connect nothing with nothing” seems to speak of the disjointed feel of Eliot’s poem as a whole. But as Helen Williams has pointed out, if one spends time teasing out the web of literary allusions, certain repeated references emerge, such as the Grail and Fertility myths, that give shape to the poem, not through the linear progression of the epic poem, but in a patterned, cyclical way creating a “simultaneous” rather than “developing” order (Williams 1968: 26).

## CHAPTER FOUR:

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### REFLEXIVITY AS RENEWAL: REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF ART AND THE ARTIST IN THE WORK OF ANSELM KIEFER

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Anselm Kiefer, one of the most significant painters to emerge in the late twentieth century<sup>43</sup>, first appeared on the art scene in the late 1960's, when practices we now call postmodern were beginning to emerge in the work of artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, and John Cage. His artistic development was shaped by concerns particularly relevant to Germany, where the avant-garde was engaged with what Habermas famously termed the “unfinished project”<sup>44</sup> of modernity. Kiefer lists van Gogh as an influence in his *Autobiography* (fig.31), and made two painting which allude to Virginia Woolf (fig.32), whose novels he read and admired (Rosenthal 1998: 58). It is thus hardly surprising that that his particular mode of reflexivity both has much in common with the modernist modes of reflexivity I have been discussing, and constitutes a radical break with these modes. An almost romantic belief in art as a force of renewal coexists uneasily in his oeuvre with the ubiquitous and explicit theme of the limits of artistic language. His oeuvre resonates with the modernist reflexive drive to renew the language of representation so that it might better image and thus contain a “world that has lost all stability and order” (Parsons 2007: 11). It also displays an irreverent postmodern disregard for formal purity, coherence or closure. While suggesting that art is a force of regeneration – a ‘heroic’ human faculty that alone is capable of creating meaning – Kiefer’s work nevertheless *flaunts* its own status as a construct (or, in Waugh’s phrase, it’s “fictitiousness” (1984: 22)) in a manner characteristic of much postmodern art and

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<sup>43</sup> Chase Madar, reviewing recent writing about Kiefer, predicts that his work will “endure deep into the young century”, as he is a “painter of exceptional talent and intellect” (2002: 6).

<sup>44</sup> As Hutcheon tells us, Habermas argued that “the project of modernity, rooted in the context of Enlightenment rationality, was still unfinished and required completion” (1989: 23). Various critics have commented on way that German artists returned to humanist, expressive themes associated with modernism after the Second World War (Hopkins 2000: 93; Koltz, 1989:7; Hutcheon 1989: 24 ). This is attributed by chroniclers like Hopkins to the way that German modern art was suppressed by the Nazi regime as “degenerate”, fuelling a return by younger artists after the war to what they saw as a process of exploration that had been interrupted (Hopkins 2000: 93).

literature. His practice, which spans photography, painting, sculpture, installation and artists' books, frequently crosses disciplinary boundaries, suggesting that the "work" is a text among other texts; exhibits a skepticism regarding the equation of the artists or the work's reflexivity with self-knowledge; and affirms Derridean freeplay of meaning through the production of multiple variants of the same work.

Like that of Vincent van Gogh and Virginia Woolf, Kiefer's practice undertakes to both represent 'reality' or 'the world' and raise certain issues around representation.<sup>45</sup> His frequent use of centred single point perspective draws the viewer into pictorial space, while their thick, encrusted surfaces, often inscribed with texts and overlaid with the schematic images or icons (such as the artist's palette), relentlessly emphasises their status as objects in the world. In the same way that the "materiality" of his paintings "returns the viewer to the real space he or she inhabits" (Rosenthal 1998: 9), their sometimes confrontational subject matter addresses some of the weightiest historical events of the twentieth century. Informed by the 'conceptual' artists of the 1960's such as Allan Kaprow, John Cage and Joseph Beuys, who sought a renewed form of direct contact between art and life after the abstractions of late-modernist painting and sculpture<sup>46</sup>, Kiefer is concerned, like Woolf had been some thirty years earlier, with challenging formal conventions in order that art might address contemporary experience.

However, the challenge that Kiefer's work presents to illusion or mimesis is not based, as were the examples earlier discussed, on an insistence that 'reality' is perceived through the lens of individual subjectivity. Instead, much of his oeuvre functions to highlight the embeddedness of the artwork in 'life', emphasising what we might call the 'intertextual' (Gilmour 1998: 341) nature of both, emphasising, in a much more explicit or programmatic way, that our understanding of 'life' or the 'world' is as much a construct as the artwork itself. To put it in post-structuralist terminology, both the painting and the

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<sup>45</sup> Kiefer's work tackles public issues such as German identity, German guilt, and the events of the Holocaust. Although, as I have argued, both van Gogh and Woolf are concerned with larger societal issues, Kiefer's engagement with them is more pointed and arguably more political.

<sup>46</sup> Heinrich Koltz has commented that although Beuys challenged the students who saw themselves as painters to "take art into life", his "actions" remained theatrical, a staged performance rather than the indistinguishable "flow of art into life" that occurred in, for example, Kaprow's raised consciousness of his own tooth-brushing rituals (1989: 8).



world are viewed as *texts*, thus collapsing the privileged relationship of the work to the world that modern representations like *To the Lighthouse* and van Gogh's self-portraits maintain despite the developing skepticism about the ability of the first to transparently image the second. The work no longer speaks authoritatively about the world from a privileged position of formal integrity but has become enmeshed in that world. Kiefer's art is highly emotive – often criticised, as Chase Madar remarks, for bordering on “bombast” (2002: 6). However, as Gilmour argues, “the expressive elements in his work reflect a conception of emotive forces not grounded in a unified conscious subject” (1998: 341).

Although I follow Gilmour in viewing Kiefer as “one of those artists who exemplifies major trends within postmodern culture,” (1998: 341) this chapter, through a close examination of his particular mode of reflexivity, will show how modern and postmodern reflexive strategies (both versions of Derrida's turning) are not mutually exclusive but can in fact coexist. Following my discussion of form and the depiction of the artist in modernism, I have focused on both Kiefer's use of materials and his frequent return to the pallet imagery as an explicit comment on the “fictitiousness” of art, its function *as* art and the role of the artist.<sup>47</sup>

## **4.2 ART AS A FORCE OF RENEWAL AND THE ARTIST AS HERO**

### **4.2.1 Reflexivity and the Function of Art in Kiefer's Palette Imagery**

“Much postmodern art is not concerned with representing reality but with rethinking the function of art” (Cartwright & Sturken 2001: 262).

Paintings of painters at work abound in the history of art, from Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting* (fig. 33) to Courbet's *The Painter's studio* (fig. 34). When critical thinking began to double back on itself, or, as Derrida puts it, the “structurality of structure” (1966: 278) began to be thought, these images became especially significant to theorists

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<sup>47</sup> There are many aspects of Kiefer's work that I have had to exclude from my discussion. For example, although I see Kiefer's engagement with historical subject matter as an important aspect of his reflexive strategies in that it performs the re-orientation of reflexive concerns back to explicitly historical subject matter, an in-depth engagement with his treatment of holocaust imagery is impossible here, as is a sustained consideration of his use of alchemic ideas.

writing about representation. Foucault, for example, uses Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (fig. 35), a painting in which "representation is represented at every turn" (1966: 307) as a kind of appetiser to *The Order of Things*, an example of the kind of thinking that his own study will enact. Such paintings can be seen as a reflection on the role of art and the artist – they seem to take us 'behind the scenes' as it were, allowing us a privileged glimpse of the process of creation, while using the 'honesty' that this intimate view suggests to comment on, or promote a certain idea of, the role of art and the artist.

Although, as will be suggested in this section and discussed at greater length in the following section, reflections on the history, the ability and the limitations of art operate through what we might term formal or visual reflexive means, such reflections are perhaps most obviously evoked in Kiefer's work through what we might call symbolic or literary/narrative means, through the repeated references to the artists pallet.

*Painting = Burning*, (fig. 36) is a good example of the layering of modern and postmodern reflexive concerns in Kiefer's work. In this painting, an artist's palette is inscribed on a massive, blackened and barren landscape. The landscape itself is painted in such a way that both creates the illusion of an expanse of wasted/used up field and affirms the materiality of the paint, in a manner perhaps consciously reminiscent of van Gogh.<sup>48</sup> We are drawn in by the vastness of the scale and the diminishing perspective, while the way the paint runs in rivulets down the canvas or asserts itself in obdurate black masses, calls our attention to the surface of the painting, asserting its objecthood in the same way that van Gogh's thick, gestural application of paint in *Wheatfield Under a Clouded Sky* (fig.37) can be said to do. The outline of the pallet, however, alerts us to the activity or process of painting in a more literal way, which complicates the way that the

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48 Kiefer acknowledges van Gogh as an early influence in his "autobiography" (Rosenthal 1987: 11) – a list of words in chronological order alluding to major invents or influences in his life. In 1963 Kiefer visited France "on the trail of van Gogh" (Celant 2007: 273). In a diary entry, published in the Heaven and Earth catalogue, he describes the studies that he made there as "van Gogh-like", remarking that "I believe that I am now quite good and much freer at releasing and rendering an impression" (2007: 274). Although Kiefer's paintings are less dramatically gestural than van Gogh's, his combination of central, piercing perspective with a tactile application of paint which foregoes the illusionistic description of detail, is strikingly similar to van Gogh's. Later in his career, Kiefer returned to the South of France, and his use of sunflower seeds as a medium are a direct reference to van Gogh's paintings of the same flowers.

painting, to use Diderot's phrase, "absorbs" us (Conner 1989: 91).<sup>49</sup> Its outsized scale, its simplified, schematic form, as well as the change in perspective creates a contrast of representation styles that reminds us that representation is always part of a particular convention, always part of a language, and casts Kiefer's tactile handling of paint in the light of a knowing quotation, rather than an attempt at unmediated expression. It sits between us and the landscape, reminding us insistently that what we are seeing is a painting, disrupting what Cascardi calls the "naturalistic thesis": the view that "there is an essential, internal order of things" that can be represented by language (Cascardi 1992: 15).<sup>50</sup>

However, Kiefer does more than simply remind us that his paintings are not "windows onto reality" but objects made by human hands. *Painting = Burning* also reflects on the *function* of painting, which is portrayed in an ambivalent or paradoxical light. As Rosenthal points out, the way in which Kiefer overlays a burned field with a palette, as well as the title *Painting = Burning*, "likens the activity of the painter and the dictator, the latter causing the landscape to be scorched" (1988: 60). The act of painting is thus linked not to creation, but to destruction.

The word "burning" is covered over with paint, barely discernable, reappearing in reddish brown in the rightmost curve of the palette, camouflaged against the black landscape. Thus *burning* is linked to erasure and disappearance, recurrent themes in Kiefer's oeuvre. His book *March Sand* (fig. 38), for example, depicts the disappearance of a field of wheat

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49 Diderot, Conner tells us, posited that there are two kinds of artworks, those that absorb the viewer into their own space, and those that are deliberately theatrical, casting flirtatious glances at the audience (1989: 90). Still life painting, arranged for the viewer, is an example of this second category, which Diderot "mistrusts" as affected, while history painting to him is more absorbed in its own action. Diderot's idea that art should be absorbed in itself (and thus allow the viewer to become absorbed in it), was adopted, Conner explains, by Michael Fried in support of the abstractions of modern art, which achieves "the limit in self-absorption" (1989:92). As Conner points out, an awareness of the viewer, or "theatricality", according to this view, is thought of pejoratively as self-consciousness, as it inhibits the viewer's engagement with the work (1989: 91). Viewed in this way, Diderot's and Fried's view of the "self-absorption" of modern work is clearly distinct from the way in which postmodern reflexivity "flaunts" its own artifice (1984: 22).

50 However, although schematic, the treatment of the outline of the palette is consistent with the rest of the painting in its imprecision, in the evocation of spontaneity or immediacy suggested by its evident revision. In this way, the painting's various levels and perspectives are arguably reconciled, producing a formal coherence different from, say, the play of styles evident in Sigmar Polke's *This is how you sit correctly (after Goya)*. (fig. 39) , or Pat Stier's *A Vantias of Style* (fig. 40).

by means of a series of photographs that become progressively covered in sand. Similarly, the ploughed field depicted in his painting *Nuremberg* (fig. 41) is partially obscured by straw. Kiefer's method of imposing a tactile or abstract layer between the viewer and the illusion of space emphasises the work's status as object, and enacts a reflection on the limitations of this object to image 'reality'.

However, the 'burning' that painting is associated with can also be linked to the idea of transformation: as Massimo Cacciari has it in his poetic "tribute" to Anselm Kiefer in the book that accompanies Kiefer's *Heaven and Earth* exhibition, "Painting = burning, separating, dissolving, transforming" (1997: 11). Cacciari describes this as the "deeply rooted *aporia* of every *poesis* – and therefore of every painting" (1997: 11). Kiefer, he implies, is imaging artistic representation as something that always contains a necessary and productive gap or absence. If we take this gap to be the inevitable distance between representation and its subject posited by theorists after structuralism, Kiefer can be imagined not as trying to close this gap with a seamless illusion but to celebrate it as a powerful force of renewal.<sup>51</sup>

The image of art as a force of renewal can be read into many of Kiefer's depictions of the palette. In *To Paint* (fig. 42), a large palette hangs cloudlike over a landscape, constructed with the same simple blue line as slants across the painting to suggest a torrential downpour, thus linking art to the regenerative powers of rain. In many of Kiefer's paintings and photographs, the palette appears with wings, seeming to liken artistic activity to a transcendent spiritual force, a connection emphasised in his many versions of angels holding palettes (figs. 43 & 44). In *Faith, Hope, Love* (fig. 45), three trees, with the words "Faith", "Hope" and "Love", grow from a stump-like palette, suggesting, as Rosenthal points out, that "artistic activity nourishes these virtues" (1998: 62).

It is dangerous, however, to read these images at face value, as they are often ambiguous, or laced with Kiefer's keen sense of irony. In his book on Kiefer called *After the*

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51 Cacciari certainly links Kiefer's "burning" to a celebration of the "imaginative power" of art, saying that if "the image did not burn *in painting*, we would mirror reality itself, or rather the illusion of reality itself" (1998: 12).

*Catastrophe*, Raphael López-Pedraza sees the trees coming out for the palette in *Faith, Hope, Love* as petrified, tortured growths, and reads the paintings as a reflection on the loss of currency of the Christian virtues in a post-Holocaust world (1996:51). The freedom of the winged palette is undermined by lines connecting it to the earth in *Palette with Wings* (fig. 46), and by the connotations of weight suggested by the metal out of which it is formed in Kiefer's sculpture of the same title, as well as by its stand, which, while elevating it, emphasises its connection to the ground (fig. 47). Many of Kiefer's depictions of the palette motif are thus ambiguous, suggesting art as a means of renewal or transcendence while hinting at its failure or limitation in this capacity, in an echo of both the Romantics and van Gogh.

These melancholic undertones at times become the dominant theme of a work. In *Palette on a Rope* (fig. 48) it is suspended on a burning rope over a void; in *Migard* (fig. 49) it lies cracked and broken on the ground, threatened by the presence of a massive snake, that perennial Judeo-Christian symbol of evil. Following Rosenthal, in *Iconoclastic Controversy* (fig. 50), the palette can be read as a battle-field: the ground on which the political struggle suggested by the tanks as well as ideological struggle to which the title alludes is played out.<sup>52</sup> In *Icarus- March Sand* (fig. 51) a winged palette flies over (or falls down towards) a chaotic, burning landscape. Artistic activity is thus linked to Icarus' attempted escape, which we know from the myth is doomed. Icarus' fault, causing him to ignore his father's warning and fly too close to the sun, which melts his wax wings and causes him to fall to his death, is hubris. Through linking Icarus' fate to that of art, Kiefer suggests the very confidence in art as regeneration expressed in many of his works may be as misplaced as Icarus' faith in the infallibility of his wings. In *Sick Art* (fig. 52), the palette motif is suggested by the arrangement of pink formations that, when viewed in connection with the title, take on the appearance of suppurating sores. In these images, Kiefer connects art to struggle, disease and distress.

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52 According to Rosenthal, the title alludes to violent historical debate over the role and nature of images, dating back to the Iconoclasts, who "held that religious images should not exist at all", and went to extreme lengths to enforce their views, exiling, murdering, and imprisoning painter-monks (1987: 76).

Kiefer's depiction of art as an endangered or threatened source of renewal in some senses has much in common with the modern evocation of hard-won art as that which gives shape to a chaotic world.<sup>53</sup> Just as van Gogh saw challenges to the realist convention as paths to a "truth" that was "truer than the literal truth" (Van Gogh in Auden 1961: 244), and Lily's abstracted depiction of "her vision" (Woolf 1927: 281) is connected, albeit somewhat ambiguously, with closure and understanding, Kiefer's answer to the question of whether that artist conveys meaning is a firm "Yes" (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 158).<sup>54</sup> The artist, according to Kiefer, "established a coherence that no-one else can produce" (*ibid*). Earlier in the interview in which he makes these comments, Kiefer rejects science as an objective knowledge of the world, saying that "science is always biased", and that, as "it does not question itself", it is "meaningless" (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 157). It is not *useless*, but is not a source of meaning. Kiefer's attitude towards religious systems of thought is similarly skeptical: although he engages with the imagery of Christian and Jewish belief, he never adopts one outlook as his own. His approach is rather to try on various ideas. It is thus tempting to suggest that, in Kiefer's work, art replaces these systems as a source of 'meaning', implying that art is somehow a meta-discourse, a system of explanation based on an objective viewpoint. It could be said that, because he suggests, through his writing and his paintings, that art alone creates meaning, Kiefer treats art as a type of "centre", and thus echoes the version of reflexivity I have associated with the modern concern with form and subjectivity, a type of reflexivity Derrida describes as concerned with "a truth or an origin which escapes freeplay and the order of the sign" (1966: 292).

However, Kiefer also says that the artist "endows meaning *in making something that is meaningless*" (my italics) (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 158). When asked to explain this he links it back to a skepticism of humanism: "When one frees oneself from the premise that man is the center of the world, the center of the cosmos, meaninglessness arises. Still, there are clouds, rain and wind and no-one knows why. And what the artist does is just as unexpected, just as unsubstantiated and meaningless in this sense" (Kiefer in Echt 1990:

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53 John Gilmour remarks that Kiefer's faith in the ability of art to "renew" is an instance where his "postmodernism" retains a "central goal of the avant-garde" (1988:349).

54 "...and the artist, does he convey meaning?", Yes, only the artist" Kiefer adds, "by which I do not mean only the professional artist (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 157).

158). In *this* formulation, art is not seen as something separate to life, which reflects back *on* life, but as irrevocably embedded *in* life. Art, in a post-humanist society, Kiefer's words suggest, operates without reference to a natural or inevitable centre.

When speaking about his use of the palette as a symbol, Kiefer brings these two ways of viewing art into a productive tension. "The palette", he says, "represents the art of painting; everything else which can be seen in the painting – for example, the landscape – is, as the beauty of nature, annihilated by the palette. You could put it this way: the palette wants to abolish the beauty of nature." However, he goes on to remark: "It is all very complicated, because it does not become annihilated at all" (in Rosenthal 1987: 60). Kiefer seems to see his technique of "burning", or overlaying or complicating of erasing or covering, as a process of purification – it is the purification of romantic notions of nature, purification of the idea that painting can and should directly image reality. Through the reflexivity of his work, the explicit comment of art on itself, Kiefer implies, our apprehension of "the beauty of nature" is actually enabled. The recognition of the limitations of art as a force of renewal are paradoxically what enables Kiefer to return, in an age of skepticism about the abilities of representation, to a conception of art and the artist as heroic.

#### **4.2.2 The Artist as Hero and the Divided Self**

The contradiction (art is both meaningful and meaningless) that becomes apparent when Kiefer's paintings double back to speak about the role of art, is further apparent in his approach to the artistic identity, or the imaging of the self as an artist. While he retains the romantic view held by certain proponents of modernism of the artist as an uncertain hero, remarking that painting is "impossible" and thus heroic (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 159), the reflexive elements in his work can be seen as conforming to the type of reflexivity proposed by Cartwright and Sturken, who emphasise how reflexivity questions "the traditional idea of the artist as someone who acts autonomously, as the sole creator of the unique work" (2001: 262). The artist is no longer seen as someone in control of representation, but is himself an "effect", (Hutcheon 1989: 7) of social, political, cultural and historical forces that operate through representation.

Cartwright and Sturken's view of the artist is evident in Kiefer's controversial *Occupations* (fig. 53), a series of photographs taken in the late 1960's, show the artist imitating a Nazi salute in landscapes across Europe. These photographs are unavoidably political, obviously referring to Hitler's occupation of Europe. The outcry which these works caused in Germany at the time of their first showing notwithstanding<sup>55</sup>, they can also be interpreted as satire – the repetition of the stiff pose of the tiny figure in vast surroundings becoming both unsettling and ludicrous. They also hint, however, at the connection between the artist and the fascist dictator, a connection which we have already seen in *Painting = Burning*, and which is also implied by works such as *Nero Paints* (fig. 54). In *Nero paints*, an outline of a palette is imposed onto a charred and burning landscape, where houses are being destroyed by fire. By invoking, as Mark Dobbins points out, the “tropos of Nero fiddling as Rome burns”, Kiefer “both accuses and identifies with the inaction of the German people as atrocities were committed in war-time” (2000: 3). In a gesture similar to George Steiner's controversial suggestion in his essay *The Hollow Miracle* (1959) that the German language was complicit in “horrors of Nazism” because of certain latent qualities it possessed, and by implication, the type of thought it enabled (in *Language and Silence* 1968:99), Kiefer suggests that art is somehow complicit in the guilt that “hangs over everything...covering it with an...impenetrable veil” (Friedrich in Dobbins, 2000: 3).

The posture that Kiefer imitates in *Occupations* is not only political: it also functions as an art-historical intertextual reference. One of the photographs closely parallels Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Misty Sea*, (fig. 55) which also shows a lone figure facing an ocean. Kiefer's photographs both extend the idea of man as a lone conqueror, turning the commanding stance of Friedrich's figure into a symbol of dictatorship, and ridicule the Romantic image of man, alone, facing and commanding the elements. In Kiefer's photographs, man is depicted as overwhelmed by a landscape that is not ‘natural’ but inescapably cultural and political<sup>56</sup>, his attempt at mastery at once

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55 Chase Madar, in a review of recent writing on Kiefer, has commented that “when his paintings were part of the German Pavilion at the 1980 Venice Biennale, his work was unanimously blasted by the German press; critics accused him of ‘flaunting his Germanness’ and reviving a best-forgotten image of megalomania” (2002:6).

56 The places depicted all show signs of human habitation.



frightening and pathetic. Through mimicking the posture of the Nazi soldier, Kiefer connects the individual artist to the realm of politics: the concern with individual psychology in modern art is replaced by a programmatic exploration of a *collective* subjectivity, of what it means, not just to be an artist, but to be a German at a particular historical juncture. The reference to Friedrich's painting places the artist as subject in a pictorial tradition, underlining the way that the roles we take on as well as our understanding of ourselves are shaped by cultural representations. In this way, his reflections on the role of the artist share in a more general postmodern concern with identity: both in critical writing and in creative practice, identity is explored in collective terms (often through the lenses of gender or ethnicity), indicative of the shift discussed in the first chapter from an understanding of subjectivity as inherent and individual to a focus on the forces that shape and create it.

Kiefer has used his own body in other works as well, both in early paintings such as *Reclining Man with Branch* (fig. 56) and *Man in the Forest* (fig. 57), and in later images such as *Sol Invictus* (fig. 58). These works, like Kiefer's *Occupations* photographs, are not conventional self-portraits. Unlike van Gogh's depictions of himself as an individual with an intense inner reality, Kiefer uses his body more as a vehicle to explore different possible roles. As he puts it in an interview, "I use myself as material, like colour" (Rosenthal 1998:28). Kiefer's depiction of himself can thus be seen not so much as trying to capture the essence of his subjectivity as show that subjectivity to be something fluid, changeable, and always embodied. When compared to van Gogh's self-portraits, Kiefer's use of his own body seems somewhat impersonal or distant. This is partly due to the use of black and white photography, a medium with connotations of objectivity. It is also an effect of Kiefer's scalar relationships: the focus on the inner life or personality of the artist shifts to a use of the artist as a sign – as one component in an aesthetic or textual game. Kiefer's self-insertion is overtly reflexive in a typically postmodern way: his insertion of himself into the text comments on the self *as* text.

Kiefer's treatment of the artist's palette, and his depictions of himself, thus resonate both with the modern appeal to art as a source of meaning and renewal, and to the artist as threatened but heroic, and with the shift in focus from the inner workings of the artist to

an explicit, programmatic reflection on the function of representation in mediating both our subjectivity and our understanding of “reality” that is characteristic of postmodern texts.

#### **4.3. TRANSGRESSING AESTHETIC BOUNDARIES: REFLEXIVITY IN KIEFER’S APPROACH TO FORM**

In Kiefer’s use of what I have called formal or visual reflexivity, there is a similar layering of modern and postmodern reflexive concerns. I have already discussed Kiefer’s affirmation of the materiality of the medium in *Painting=Burning*. Kiefer’s use of mixed media, what can be termed his intertextuality, and the way his work combined painterly and sculptural elements, however, deserve further attention.

Sometimes the very characteristics that tie Kiefer’s reflexive strategies to modernism’s questioning of illusionism are also hall-marks of postmodernism. Mark Rosenthal has commented that *Iconoclastic Controversy* (fig. 59), for example, has links to Cubist collage (1987: 76). He points out that although Kiefer combines disparate media, mixing the languages of photography, oil painting and printmaking, and non-traditional art materials (in this case, sand), each “element” is nevertheless formally considered, applied in order to “reinforce or echo another and to serve the composition as a whole” (1987: 76). The black painted lines, he points out, visually extend the cracks in the central palette/crater, the thumbhole of the painted palette could also be read as a knot in the wood, and forms an “opaque rhyme” with the central crater (1987: 76). His use of subtle variations within a limited tonal range is also reminiscent of works like Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning* (fig. 60). In creating a surface that is at once disjunctive and formally coherent, Kiefer, as Rosenthal remarks, has “adopted the Cubist collagists’ sleight of hand” (1987: 76). His disruption of the coherence of the picture plane, through the combination of different media and levels shares what Stam calls the “artistic self-consciousness of Cubism, whereby the artist calls attention, in Orlega y Gasset’s famous metaphor, not to what is being seen through the window but rather to the window itself” (1992: xv).

However, the juxtapositioning of different media can also be seen as characteristic of postmodern reflexivity, and the difference becomes clearer when we look at works where the introduction of traditionally non-art materials becomes much more explicit. In a work like *Untitled* (fig. 61), Kiefer affixes lead and steel to the surface of the work. Owing to their size and shape, these objects distinctly lack the ambiguity which allows Picasso's piece of wicker caning to read simultaneously as part of the surface and as a three dimensional object. They are obstinately sculptural, combining painting, photography and sculpture in a way that, as Gilmour remarks, violates the "purity of the medium championed by the modernists"<sup>57</sup>, and extends the painting outward into the space of the viewer, thus blurring the divide between the space of art and that of life. That the inclusion of these objects is a conscious play with the conventions of representation is evident in Kiefer's remark in an interview with Bernard Comment. In a response to the observation that he "seemed to like mixing real objects with painted ones", Kiefer replied "It's a reflection about illusion" (in Comment 1998: 295). If we follow Kiefer, who states for example that what he finds interesting in Warhol's work is the destruction of the barrier between art and life (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 157), it may be that while he comments on "illusion", he also wishes to avoid making art that is *solely* "about art" (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 157), seeking what Hutcheon calls a "vital" contact between "art" and "life" (1980: 154). In this way, Kiefer's combination of different materials both echoes and extends the Cubists' reflection on representation.

However, certain of the reflexive strategies that Kiefer uses are distinctively postmodern. One of these is the way that his work, as Gilmour puts it, "points towards an intertextual basis for representation" (1998: 341). What Gilmour is suggesting is that Kiefer's work acknowledges its position in a particular field: acknowledges the way in which his work is not the unique emanation of genius but a text that is informed by other texts,

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<sup>57</sup> As I have pointed out in earlier chapters, not all modern art was as rigorously 'true' to its own medium as Gilmour suggests. The supposed purity of the medium had already begun to be questioned by modern collage.

foregrounding its relationship not to the unique subjectivity of the author, but to the system of art that in effect produced it.<sup>58</sup>

This becomes particularly clear in Kiefer's artist books. The cover of one of his first books, *You're a Painter* (fig. 62), shows a photograph of a sculpture. The sculpture, with its raised elbow, pointing finger and firmly lifted chin, has a decisive and commanding air. The handwritten words "You're a Painter" above it take on a tone of command, an "exhortation", as Rosenthal puts it, to both Kiefer and the figure on the cover, to "create ideas, shape the world" and "vehemently take action" (1987: 14). By embedding another artwork in his own work (one that has already been mediated through the language of photography), Kiefer explicitly places his own work in the context of art history, in a more explicit way than in *Occupations*, in this sense acknowledging the fact that the language of art precedes his own activity. This calling attention to the context in which art takes place, as opposed to the subjectivity of the artist, is characteristic of postmodern reflexivity.

As Rosenthal points out, when one learns that this particular sculpture is by a Nazi-approved artist, possibly Josef Thorak, the title, which Rosenthal describes as a call to action (1987: 14), becomes somewhat disturbing: as in *Nero Paints*, there is an unsettling suggestion of an inevitable, lingering relationship to the past. Rosenthal points out that Kiefer's point may be clearer than this: in this book Kiefer abandons the concern with international art that preoccupied German artists, and declares his concern with local themes: namely post- Holocaust German identity. By quoting a Nazi-approved sculpture as an introduction, however, he questions the relationship between this move and the way that the Nazi's "jettisoned international art" in favour of an exploration of their "own roots", posing the question, "is he then, a Nazi heir at heart?" (1987: 14). Kiefer thus brings his own project into a critically productive relationship with the art of the past.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Although a precursor to this technique of appropriation can be found in Woolf's references to other novels in *To The Lighthouse*, or in T.S Eliot's technique of allusion in *The Waste Land*, the American art of the mid-twentieth century, from abstract expressionist painting to minimal sculpture, which dominated the international art scene, was not intertextual in this way. Modernism *à la* Greenberg, as we have seen, emphasised the art object as a discreet and self-contained entity.

<sup>59</sup> This critical relationship is also evident in *The Flooding of Heidelberg*, where Kiefer uses an already existing book as the basis for his own manipulation, altering a text that is already a given, but also

Elizabeth Long has remarked that Kiefer's books raise another question that is frequently suppressed by the way his books are often presented as "one of a kind", unique artists' books (2007: 14). As Long points out, Kiefer frequently produces more than one version of the same book, repeating similar images in a different order, or with a different title, or the same images with a different title (*ibid*). This "repetitive style production", also visible in the way many of Kiefer's paintings function in series, is, as Long points out, indicative of something that is "core to his artistic endeavour" (2007: 14)<sup>60</sup>. As Long points out, some of the titles of the books may function as titles for paintings. Although each of the books is individual, put together slightly differently, the repetition of content and titles draws our awareness to the fact that "these works do not stand alone, solitary and context less" (2007: 15). The presence of the other works impacts on how this work is understood: as Norris puts it, they cannot transparently convey meaning, but operate in a system of "sameness and difference" (1983:5). The presence of multiple other versions of the same theme also creates the impression that, as James Hysen says of Kiefer's woodcuts, "no version is correct, and each must play its part, depending on the context" (in Long 2007: 15), thus affirming the Derridean "freeplay" of meaning and association. Kiefer thus resists the idea that the work contains one, final meaning, answering the question of "when is a work finished for you?" by saying "Never. Or always when viewed by a person" (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 159). In contrast to the way in which van Gogh tried to embody an idea in his paintings, Kiefer sees the meaning of the artwork as fluid and ongoing, crystallising in moments when it is actively communicating.<sup>61</sup>

Kiefer's intertextuality can also be seen in his use of text. His attic paintings are overlaid with lyrics from Wagner's opera, while lines from Paul Celan's poem *Death Fuge* are both inscribed on, and become, the titles of many of Kiefer's *Marguerite/Sulamith*

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allowing its language to become part of his own work, dramatising the way that all representations are rooted in, or informed by, pre-existing structures and conventions.

<sup>60</sup> "The images alone do not tell the story", Long reminds us, "for the choice to put them in a book format allows Kiefer to incorporate issues of sequence, temporality, and narrative structure into the work of art" (2007: 14). In this way, Kiefer can be seen to emphasise and exploit the idea that artworks are not discreet entities that can be read in isolation, as one text will impact on the meaning of another.

<sup>61</sup> Importantly, Kiefer does not see the work as embodying a message that can be decoded by a viewer. When someone sees his painting, Kiefer maintains, "a picture arises for them that I am only partially responsible for" (Kiefer in Celant, 2007: 159).

paintings. Kiefer's quotations of Wagner or Celan functions in a similar way to his appropriation of Nazi sculpture – they explicitly and pointedly bring Kiefer's own work into a dialogue with other representations.

Kiefer's work thus experiments with form, crossing boundaries between different media and incorporating other texts into his own work in a way that both echoes the modernist search for a new form, and challenges the limits of that search.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

An investigation of reflexivity in the work of Anselm Kiefer thus reveals the complex interaction between what I have referred to as modern and postmodern modes of “doubling”, or reflexivity. Kiefer's move away from the emphasis on the subjective, personal viewpoint expressed by the unique artistic personality through a discreet, self-referring artwork and his challenge to the modernist avant-garde's assertion of the artwork's independence from its own history and conventions seem initially opposed to his assertion that art is the only human function that generates meaning and his conception of the artist as “heroic” (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 159). In order to resolve this contradiction, one might read Kiefer's quotes about the rejection of the idea of genius and the works finding its completion in the viewer as lip service to postmodernism, or see his assertion that the artist is “heroic” and that art gives meaning to the world as idiosyncrasies, easily ignored in the face of his essentially postmodern practice. But besides pointing to the inevitable continuity between modernist and postmodernist modes and the necessarily reductive categorisation these terms involve, Kiefer's work shows how the conception of the art as a *vital* activity, capable of engaging in a meaningful way with both ourselves and the world, *depends* on a recognition of the limitations and difficulties of representation. In Kiefer's oeuvre, postmodern reflexive strategies both complicate the modernist drive to find and communicate meaning and attempt, through a critical engagement, to *renew* this drive. Through the use of these reflexive strategies, Kiefer moves “towards the edge of the hole toward the center”, even while acknowledging that this is a “black hole or [...] crater whose center cannot be attained” (Kiefer in Echt 1990: 157).]

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### **“WE ARE WRITING... WE ARE WRITING...”: THE DRAMATISATION OF AUTHORSHIP IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER’S EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED**

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#### **5.1: INTRODUCTION**

Like all the examples I have discussed so far, *Everything is Illuminated* does not dispense with the creation of illusion: its reflections on language and writing are accompanied by the creation of a story-world that is detailed and relatively coherent, and a plot that, while not presented in a linear manner, nevertheless develops sequentially.<sup>62</sup> However, while drawing the reader in, Foer’s novel simultaneously foregrounds, or flaunts, its own “condition of artifice” (Waugh 1984: 22) through a distinctly postmodern dramatisation of the process of reading and writing that itself, in great measure, comes to constitute the subject matter.

While the tactics employed in *Everything is Illuminated*<sup>63</sup> may not be those of Brechtian “alienation” which Hutcheon ascribes to novelists such as John Barth in *Narcissistic Narratives* (1980: 49), Foer’s novel nevertheless displays many of the characteristics that define “metafiction” for Waugh<sup>64</sup>: the “visibly inventing narrator”; the “ostentatious typographic experiment”; the “explicit dramatization of the reader; the “incantory and absurd lists” and “over-systematized or overtly arbitrary arranged structural devices”; and the use of “obtrusive proper names” and “self-reflexive images” (Waugh 1984: 22). These reflexive devices problematise, in an explicit, sustained, and *self-conscious*

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<sup>62</sup> This allows it to be read in a different (potentially less cerebral) way to other postmodern novels, say Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, or Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, which deliberately avoid providing such easy pleasures.

<sup>63</sup> Hereafter referred to as Foer 2002 in citations.

<sup>64</sup> For both Hutcheon and Waugh, reflexivity is one of, if not the most important, distinguishing features of experimental fiction of the late twentieth century that they describe as “metafiction”. Although they (and other critics of postmodern fiction such as Steven Connor (1989: 130)) see its reflexivity as developing out of the concerns of modern texts, they all distinguish clearly between the self-consciousness of Woolf or Joyce, and the reflexivity of Barth, Calvino, or Fowles, whose fiction, as the term “metafiction” suggests, is explicitly *about* fiction. While the novel is acknowledged to be to “inherently self conscious”, as Waugh puts it (1983: 98) – linked, as Barthes suggests, to the “rise of bourgeois consciousness” (Hutcheon 1980: 10) – the emergence of the “implicit tendency of the novel to draw attention to its linguistic construction” as the “dominant function” of a text is typical of both individual works and of “the contemporary novel *as a whole*” (Waugh 1983: 98).

manner, the construction, or *writing* of the text itself (Waugh 1984: 22). In contrast to the formal experimentation of modern authors, whose shifting perspectives can to a large extent be recuperated as psychological realism, for metafictional authors, as Waugh points out, “the most basic assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or ‘constructing’ one’s ‘reality’” (Waugh 1983: 26).

The active role that representation plays in constructing both the literary text and the world becomes apparent in *Everything is Illuminated* through both its formal and its thematic reflexivity. Not only does Foer’s novel point to its own fictionality by means of reflexive play with the stylistic conventions of the novel, it also thematises, or dramatises, the reading and writing process. His novel is comprised of the writings of two fictional characters, one named Jonathan Safran Foer, and the other named Alex. Their writing, and their comments on each other’s writing, tell a story. This chapter will focus on the particularly reflexive way in which they do so, looking at how both Jonathan’s and Alex’s style’s can be said to “flaunt their own status as artifice”, (Waugh 1983: 22) as well as how at the theme of reading and writing reflects on the connection between the constructedness of the text and that of the “life”.

## **5.2 JONATHAN**

### **5.2.1: Jonathan as a portrait of the author**

Like *To the Lighthouse*, Foer’s novel is partially based on autobiographical events. As Barbara Maria Pörtl points out, Foer’s maternal grandfather, Louis Safran, was a holocaust survivor who met his second wife in a camp for displaced persons in Poland after the war, in which his first wife and young daughter were killed, after which Foer’s grandfather immigrated to America (2009: 1). When Foer was 20, he visited the Ukraine, “armed” with a photograph of the woman who had “saved [his] grandfather from the Nazi’s”, and embarked on a search for Trachimbrod, the shtetl that his ancestors had lived in (Foer in Pörtl 2009: 1). Pörtl tells us that “he did not find anything, because the shtetl had been completely destroyed” (2009: 1).

The ‘hero’ of *Everything is Illuminated* is a young “self-deprecating” writer (Solomon 2005: 1), also named Jonathan Safran Foer, who goes in search of this same shtetl, also



aided by a photograph of the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. To help him in his search Jonathan enlists the services of a Ukrainian translator, Alex, and a tour-guide/driver, Alex's grandfather. When Jonathan gets back to America, he begins to write a novel about his family history, set in Trachimbrod, which he sends to Alex in divisions as he writes it, while paying Alex to write his own account of their three day search. The story is told in three separate but interlinking narrative strands. Alex's account, narrated in the first person, describes the trip in detail. Jonathan's novel is a whimsical family history, reminiscent of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*<sup>65</sup>. Alex's letters to Jonathan comment on the progression of Jonathan's novel, reflect on the changes Jonathan has asked him to make, and continue the story of what happens to Alex and his family in the months following the search for Trachimbrod. These different narratives alternate throughout the novel.

Through naming the writer in the novel, who is also, we are told, the author of part of the novel, after himself, Foer creates a certain expectation that the character of Jonathan is autobiographical, an expectation increased by similarities of age and occupation. This is quite different from Woolf's portrayal of Lily Briscoe, in that while Lily is clearly a vehicle for Woolf to comment on the creative process, there is no confusion as to her and Woolf being the same person. However, while Woolf treats Lily with a certain aesthetic detachment, the distance Foer creates between himself and the Jonathan in the story is somewhat greater. Not only does Foer use Alex as the first person narrator instead of Jonathan, he also makes numerous jokes at Jonathan's expense. When he first meets Jonathan, Alex is "underwhelmed to the maximum" by Jonathan's appearance, remarking that "In truth, he did not look like anything special at all" (FOER 2002:3 2). In a subsequent letter to Jonathan (we never read Jonathan's letters, only Alex's) Alex reassures him, "As you commanded, I removed the sentence "He was severely short", and inserted in its place, "like me, he was not tall"" (Foer 2002: 53). Other changes that Jonathan has Alex make include amendments to Alex's description of his dog, Sammy

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65 *Everything is Illuminated* has often been compared to Marquez's novel, sometimes in order to indicate its derivativeness. Pörtl reads this similarity as intentional intertextuality, pointing to numerous close parallels between the books (2009: 45). While Foer may have had *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in mind as he wrote and intended a resonance between the books, I would content that the relationship is more one of subtle allusion than of the type of direct, pointed or explicit intertextuality.

Davis Jnr. Jnr's "fondness" for Jonathan (Foer 2002: 101). Thus Foer makes fun of Jonathan's vanity and wish to be portrayed as dignified. "I have made efforts", Alex writes to Jonathan as the story progresses, "to make you appear as a person with less anxiety, as you have commanded me to do on many occasions. This is difficult to achieve, as in truth you are a person of much anxiety. Perhaps you should be a drug user" (Foer 2002: 2). Alex also points out to us that Jonathan is not a "real writer", but an apprentice (Foer 2002: 100)<sup>66</sup>. The portrait of the writer that emerges is thus a satirical one: Jonathan is something of a caricature of the serious, intense writer.

Jonathan occasionally functions, like Lily, as a direct vehicle for the expression of the author's aesthetic concerns: Jonathan tells Alex that he does not write because he has anything to say, echoing the views of the author expressed in an interview that did not want to write anything with a "message" (Solomon 2005: 2). However, whereas the in *To the Lighthouse* we gain seemingly direct access to Lily's thoughts, our access to Jonathan is mediated by his own writing or Alex's story-telling.

### 5.2.2 Reflexive devices within Jonathan's novel

The novel that Jonathan writes about his family history continually highlights its own fictionality, and contains the most explicit instances of reflexivity in *Everything is Illuminated*. This section of the novel contains many of the characteristics that Waugh and Hutcheon attribute to metafiction.

#### 5.2.2.1. Topographical devices

By using italics instead of the conventional inverted commas, by capitalising the speech of the Rabbi, and by playing with the font of his chapter titles, Foer uses typographical devices in a playful way. His characters are given names such as "The Well-Regarded Rabbi", "the Gypsy girl", or "Grieving Shandra" which has the effect of flattening out their characters, reminding the reader that they are fictional characters who do not possess

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<sup>66</sup> Foer also mocks Jonathan in other ways. He is referred to by Alex and his Grandfather as "the Jew" repeatedly, and Foer has Alex call Jonathan "the hero", with some irony, as it is Alex who emerges through the course of the novel as the one who assumes the agency and ideals of a hero. Jonathan's constant interruptions with requests for translation (Foer 2002:7), his blunders with the local people in which he comes across as both patronising and naïve (Foer 2002: 109), and his anxiety make him the object of much of the novel's humour.

an inner depth that Foer is acquainted with but are called into being to serve the purpose of the story. Whereas Jane Austen for example, gives believability even to the most caricatured of her characters, Foer makes no effort to give the many minor characters in Jonathan's novel any illusion of knowability. When his characters do have proper names, they are followed by an initial to indicate their surname, such as "Pinchas T." or "Bitzl Bitzl R." In this way Foer does not ask us to believe fully in the existence of these people but rather points to the limitations of Jonathan's (and by extension his own) and our knowledge of them.

#### 5.2.2.2. *Visible invention*

From time to time, Jonathan interrupts his own story with comments that foreground its fictitiousness, while simultaneously increasing our absorption in the story. A description of Brod, for example begins with the phrase, "I've imagined her many times", and ends with "how else could it be?" (Foer 2002: 76). This bracketing of the description, while calling attention to the fact that this information about Brod is "imagined", still allows us to accept the story *as a story* by coding the description of Brod as fictional, but somehow inevitable or natural. Similarly, when Jonathan describes his grandfather, Safran, he tells us how he arrived at his ideas about Safran from looking at family portraits. His grandfather's unusually full set of teeth are "the first thing I notice whenever I examine his baby portraits. It's not my dandruff" he tells us. "It's not a smudge of gesso or white paint. Between my grandfather's thin lips, planted like albino pits in those plum-purple gums, is a full set of teeth." (Foer 2002: 65). Another thing that he notices about his grandfather is:

His arm. It would be impossible to look through all of the photographs so many times and still miss what's so unusual. But it occurs to frequently to be explained as the photographer's choice of pose. My grandfather's right hand is never holding anything- not a briefcase, not any papers, not even his other hand. (Foer 2002: 166)

Based on these observations, Jonathan extrapolates his grandfather's story in a chain of cause and effect that whose appearance of explanation is undermined both by the implausibility of some of the links he makes and by the fact that he tells us he is imagining it:

So it was because of his teeth, I imagine, that he got no milk, and it was because he got no milk that his right arm died. It was because his right arm died that he never worked in the menacing flour mill, but in the tannery just outside the shtetl, and that he was exempted from the draft that sent his schoolmates off to be killed in hopeless battle against the Nazi's (Foer 2002: 166).

Here, the “visibly inventing narrator” (Waugh 1983:22), while seemingly increasing the plausibility of the story, again points to the fact that although some of the people and places he refers to exist in the “real world”, what we are reading it is really a construct of his own imagination, inspired by other representations (paintings and photographs) of the past rather than based on objective facts<sup>67</sup>.

### 5.2.2.3. Lists and structures

The use of “incantory and absurd lists” and “overtly arbitrary arranged structural devices” (Waugh 1983: 22) is another feature of Jonathan's novel. The opening passage describes the “rising life debris” that floats to the surface of the river after a wagon crashes into it:

wandering snakes of white string, a crushed-velvet glove with outstretched fingers, barren spools, shmootzy pince-nez, rasp-and-boyenberries, feces, frillwork, the shards of shattered atomizer, the bleeding red ink scrip of a resolution: *I will...I will...* (Foer 2002: 8)

Many of these objects are re-ordered into a flow chart that, many generations later, the men of the shtetl devise while they wait for the Nazis to arrive (*fig. 63*). This flow chart is “an attempt to make sense of their memories” (Foer 2002: 259), Jonathan tells us. “They tried to follow the line back, like Theseus out of the labyrinth, but only went in deeper, farther” (*ibid*). Neither the objects that float up from the wagon nor the flow chart attempt to make sense in a rational way. Their absurdity creates a sense of fragmentation and highlights the way that meaning throughout Jonathan's novel, and in *Everything is Illuminated*, is likewise constructed by the poetic juxtaposition of fragments.

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67 Like Kiefer, Foer's work is concerned with historical and real events, reviving what Hutcheon calls the “documentary” impulse of realism (89: 7) while simultaneously foregrounding the fact that we can only know the past through representations, which are inevitably unreliable. Unlike Kiefer's avoidance of “the individual” (Kiefer in Celant 2007: 161), Foer's work explores the impact of historical events on individual characters and on the relationships between them.

#### 5.2.2.4. *The story within the story within the story*

Like Lily's painting, Jonathan's novel can be considered an instance of *mise-en-abyme*, a novel within the novel: although it does not have the same title as *Everything is Illuminated*, it is written by an author with the same name. His novel, however, also contains many books written by the characters in his novel, creating something of the feeling of "infinite regress" that Waugh associates with contemporary fiction's explicit commentary on its own processes (Waugh 1983: 22). However, the books by the characters are introduced and concluded and we come back to the previous level of the story. Thus the stories within the story are contained, or recuperated, in contrast to a novel like Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, where the reader steps from one story into the next without ever returning to the first story. The stories within the stories in Foer's novel are reflexive less because they create confusion between the different levels of fiction than for their explicit comments on literary creation. The *Book of Antecedents* is a good example. Compiled by the inhabitants of the shtetl, it expands from a religious explanation of life to a volume with so many contributors and covering so many aspects of life, "until any school boy could easily find out what his grandfather ate for breakfast on any given Thursday," and eventually has to be updated continually, as it keeps "becoming more like life" (Foer 2002: 197). Besides entries such as "The Problem of Good: Why Unconditionally Good Things Happen To Unconditionally Bad People" (which humorously says "See GOD"), "Cunnilingus and the Menstruating Woman", and "When the Rain Fell Without Lull for Five Months", which (themselves an absurd list) give us a random and fragmented glimpse of the internal life and ideas of the shetl, this book also contains entries such as "The Novel; When Everyone Was Convinced He Had One in Him", and a series of entries on "Art", "Ifice", "Ifact", "Artifice", "Artifact", as well as "Ifactifice" (Foer 2002: 202).

"The Novel" tells of a period in the life of the shetl when most of its members wrote a novel, and gives us examples of their opening sentences as well as cataloguing them, once more in an apparently random way (Foer 2002: 201). However, five years after their composition, we learn, only a handful were still read (ibid). This humorous

reflection on novel writing is an instance of postmodern self-mockery (the author of *Everything is Illuminated* is also an amateur novelist).

The entry on “Art” reads as follows:

Art is that thing having only to do with itself – the product of a successful attempt to make a work of art. Unfortunately, there are no examples of art, or reasons to think it will exist (Everything that has been made has been made with a purpose, everything with an end that exists outside that thing, i.e., *I want to sell this*, or *I want this to make me famous and loved*, or *I want this to make me whole*, or worse, *I want this to make others whole*.) And yet we continue to write, paint, sculpt, and compose. Is this foolish of us? (Foer 2002: 202)

Here Foer engages with the idea, prevalent, as we have seen, in modernism, that art should be something “having only to do with itself” – i.e. something separate from other aspects of life, and shows it to an impossible ideal. Buried as it is in a book within a novel within his novel, and surrounded by humorous entries such as “Ifactifice”, Foer here makes clear one of the key tenants of postmodernist reflexive thinking: that art is inevitably *motivated*, a *product* of socio-economic forces, rather than something that can reflect on life from outside of it.

Whereas art is defined as something “having only to do with itself”, Foer has the inhabitants of the shtetl in Jonathan’s novel come up with a new word, “ifce”, defined as “that thing with purpose, created for function’s sake, and having to do with the world.” While art is impossible, according to this definition, “everything is, in some way, an example of ifce.” What we think of as art is thus put on the same level as all the other activities which constitute “life”. The next entry in *The Book of Antecedents* drives this point home. “Artifice”, we are told, “is that thing which was art in its conception and ifce in its execution.” Whereas disinterested art is shown to be impossible, examples of artifice “are everywhere” (Foer 2002: 202). In this way, through the book within the novel within his novel, Foer seems to both collapse the distinction between art and life and, through the replacement of art with artifice, underlines the *artificiality*, the fictionality, of art in all its forms.

In the entry entitled “Ifactifice”, the word “ifact”, defined as a “past tense-fact” is combined with Ifice (“that thing with purpose...having to do with the world”) (Foer 2002: 202). The entry reads as follows:

Music is beautiful. Since the beginning of time, we (the Jews) have been looking for a new way of speaking. We often blame our treatment throughout history on terrible misunderstandings (words never mean what we want them to mean). If we could communicate with something like music, we would never be misunderstood, because in music there is nothing to misunderstand. [...] But until we find this new way of speaking, until we find a nonapproximate vocabulary, nonsense words are the best thing we’ve got. Ifactifice is one such word (Foer 2002: 202).

Always hovering between insight and nonsense, this passage mocks the dissatisfaction with the limits of language portrayed with so much seriousness in modern novels such as *To the Lighthouse*, and parodies the search undertaken by certain strands of modernism for a pure language that could communicate perfectly, pointing out that the abstractions of such a language can become meaningless (“there is nothing to understand”). Instead of abandoning the use of referential language, this passage advocates, and itself enacts, a continual reinvention, a playful use of language that embraces an admittedly “approximate” vocabulary and attempts to revitalise it. The fact that such insights, written by a “paper-thin” (Foer 2002: 89) people, are offered in an explicit, yet offhand way – mocking themselves, in their absurdity and their simplistic reasoning, as much as of grand ideas about art – is characteristic of the “complicitous critique” (Hutcheon 1989:1) of postmodernism, its refusal to take even itself seriously, and its tendency to ironies, i.e. to say something “while putting inverted commas around it” (Hutcheon 1989: 1).

#### 5.2.2.5 *Fantasy/ Whimsy*

Jonathan’s novel can also be said to problematise its own status as fiction through the inclusion of the wildly improbable and the obviously fantastical in a story that uses the names of real people and places. Often, social dynamics plausibly present in the lives of the “real” inhabitants of Trachimbrod, are suggested in a style that has come to be known as “magic-realism” – for example, the way that “secular” and “sacred” values keep shifting in the community are dramatised through the reoccurring image of the “Jewish/

Human fault line”, and the wheels that are attached to the Synagogue in order to make this constant renegotiation “less of a schlep”(Foer 2002: 10). Jonathan’s implausible inventions highlight his “novel’s” (Foer 2002: 54) distance from the conventional realist language of the genre, and its connection with mythology or folktale, blurring generic boundaries (as Kiefer does in his combination of sculpture, painting and photography) in a style typical of postmodern reflexive texts.

Many of the inventions in Jonathan’s novel are furthermore explicitly concerned with writing and its function: Yankel writes facts about himself on his ceiling with Brod’s lipstick as he ages and becomes forgetful, which on the night of his death come “flaking off the his bedroom ceiling, falling gently like blood-stained snow to his bed and floor” (Foer 2002: 97). He is also haunted by the note his wife left when she left him, which he is unable to lose; despite his best efforts it “stayed with him, like a part of him, like a birthmark, like a limb, it was on him, in him, him, his hymn: *I had to do it for myself*” (Foer 2002: 45). Writing here becomes the vehicle of memory: once again suggested as something that is intimately linked to daily life – a “thing with purpose” (Foer 2002: 202).

Jonathan’s novel, through the use of various reflexive devices, could thus itself be considered an instance of metafiction, in that it abandons any attempt to portray reality in a ‘realistic’ manner, and often takes the act of writing itself as subject matter. However, Foer does more than simply embedding a ‘metafictional’ story within his novel – by dramatising the journey that led to its creation of as well as its the reception through Alex’s story and his letters, Foer is able to further critically reflect his own ‘metafictional’ game.

### **5.3. ALEX**

#### **5.3.1 Alex as a “realist” narrator**

By focusing his novel on two characters that write, write about writing and write about reading, Foer continually calls attention to the act of creation. The use of two different writers who have distinctly different styles opens up a debate as to *how* fiction should



undertake to represent ‘reality’. In contrast to the metafictional style in which Jonathan writes, Alex’s style at first appears more conventionally realistic. We know that the same version of the events he is describing ‘really’ took place within the reality of the novel, as well as – to the extent that the Jonathan Safran Foer within the novel can be seen as an autobiographical figure – in the “real” world. Because he does not shy away from describing awkward, embarrassing or violent scenes, both in his letters to Jonathan and in his story, and because he provides us with a wealth of detail, we feel as though we can trust his candour.

Foer has Alex introduce himself in the opening page of *Everything is Illuminated* in a manner that is calculated to ensure the reader’s sympathy. His English, learned from American television, classes at his Ukrainian university, and a study of an English thesaurus, is an absurd mixture of antiquated words, malapropisms, and slang, and the humorous effect endears him to us, while the details he gives us about his family create a sense of being immersed in his world. As Pörtl has commented, however, we cannot always trust Alex’s narration (2009: 9). From the outset, his claims that “I have many many girls, believe me” (Foer 2002: 1) seem exaggerated – the very fact that he feels the need to convince us arousing the reader’s suspicion. In his later letters to Jonathan, he makes a confession:

I must inform you something now. This is a thing I have never informed anyone, and you must promise that you will not inform it to one soul. I have never been carnal with a girl. I know, I know. You cannot believe it, but all of the stories that I told you about my girls who dub me All Night, Baby, and Currency were all not-truths, and they were not befitting not-truths. I think I manufacture these not-truths because they make me feel like a premium person. (Foer 2002: 144)

Alex’s confession functions more to increase the reader’s faith in him than to make us feel betrayed. We can understand and identify with the desire to represent ourselves as better than we are, and the fact that Alex feels ashamed of his “not-truths” in fact highlights his commitment to a type of honesty. Even though, as Pörtl suggests (2009: 6), he shows himself to be prone to the exaggeration of his own merits and to be an unreliable translator, often mistranslating for Jonathan, these lapses in truthfulness are shown as the result of a desire to please, as when Alex translates his grandfather’s rude remarks into information about the trip or the surroundings (Foer 2002: 58) and

ultimately function to increase our trust in him, and establishes his letters, if not his story, as “true”, especially as he seems to become more and more ‘honest’ throughout the novel. His confessions make us feel as though we are in on a secret, or accessing an unedited, raw, version of events. Foer has him sign all his letters, “guilelessly, Alexander”, and this is clearly how we are intended to treat his lies, as relatively harmless and free from malicious intent. Any exaggerations that he makes in his story are admitted in his letters to Jonathan, which emerge as the most trustworthy of the narrative levels, precisely because it is here that the other narratives are revealed as actively constructing a story rather than describing accurately ‘real’ events.

### **5.3.2. We are being very nomadic with the truth**

From this ‘trustworthy’ perspective, Foer has Alex raise questions about Jonathan’s metafictional style<sup>68</sup>. Commenting on the way that neither he nor Jonathan try to represent ‘reality’ in detailed accuracy, Alex writes:

We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think this is acceptable when writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and about your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another question, which is if we are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life? It seems to me that we are making the story even inferior [...] We could even find Augustine, Jonathan, and you could thank her, and Grandfather and you and I could embrace, and it could be perfect and beautiful, and funny, and usefully sad, as you say... I do not think there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem. (Foer 2002: 180-181)

Foer thus uses Alex’s voice to raise moral questions about the tendency of “metafiction” to mix historical referents with overtly fantastical elements, reminding us that the people Jonathan represents in his story really existed and asserting their right to be represented with dignity, giving voice to that side of postmodernism that is concerned with the

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<sup>68</sup> It is worth noting that Alex also acts as what Williams calls a “narrative goad” (1998: 2). He repeatedly stresses how much he enjoys Jonathan’s story and, even when he grows disillusioned with it, continues to encourage Jonathan to send him instalments (Foer 2002: 214). He tells Jonathan that he is also reading Jonathan’s novel to his younger brother, who is enjoying it as much as he is (Foer 2002: 178), and praises Jonathan for the speed with which he replies, demonstrating a hunger for narrative that acts as a model for the reader, and codes the writing and reading of narrative as natural and desirable (Williams 1998: 2). In this way, although Alex criticises Jonathan’s particular approach, the telling of narrative itself is never discarded as unnecessary or impossible.

“politics of representation” (Hutcheon 1989) while also using Alex’s position to argue for art as a means of renewing, or improving life.

Alex connects the unhappiness which Jonathan’s characters suffer to their tendency to live at “one remove”, which he regards as cowardly:

You are a coward Jonathan and you have disappointed me. I would never command you to write a story that as it occurred in the actual, but I would command you to make your story faithful. You are a coward for the same explanation that Brod is a coward, and Yankel is a coward, and Safran is a coward – all of your relatives are cowards! You are all cowards because you live in a world that is “once removed” if I may excerpt you. (Foer 2002: 240).

Alex here clearly expresses the belief in “rational human agency and narrative closure” associated with realism (Petrie 2007: 103). The distinction he makes between a description of events “as they occurred in the actual” and a “faithful” story can be likened to the modernist faith in art’s ability to create order and understanding in the face of chaos – to van Gogh’s truer-than-the-literal truth. The demand for this sort of ‘truth’ is an act of innocence that Foer cannot ascribe to Jonathan, the sophisticated American writer, but is able to evoke through Alex’s own emerging literary voice (Petrie 2007: 104).<sup>69</sup>

#### **5.4. INTERACTION BETWEEN THE NARRATIVE LEVELS**

Not only does Foer’s novel suggest that writing, art, and other forms of representation are intimately connected to life, it also points to the way that language not only shapes our *understanding* of experience but can also actively create that very experience. The most dramatic example of this is the recurrence of the following passage:

He told his father that he would care for Mother and Little Igor. It took his saying it to make it true. Finally, he was ready. His father could not believe this thing. What? He asked. What? And Sasha told him again that he would take care of the family, and he would understand if his father had to leave and never return, and it would not even make him less of a father. He told his father that he would forgive. Oh, his father became so angry, so full of wrath, and he told Sasha that

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<sup>69</sup> As Petrie comments, although Foer “emphasizes the motif of innocence”, he “cannot locate it in 21st century America. Instead, he uses his fictional Ukrainian co-narrator, Alex, to establish innocence and its ability to hope as conditions to be valued and, when lost, mourned” (2007: 104).

he would kill him, and Sasha told his father that he would kill him, and they moved at each other with violence and his father said, Say it to my face, not to the floor, and Sasha said, You are not my father (Foer 2002: 160).

We first come across this passage in Alex's story of the search for Trachimbrod. Alex and Jonathan are sitting together, waiting for his grandfather to finish a private conversation with the women they have found. Alex reads Jonathan's diary, which describes this scene between him and his father (Alex is sometimes called Sasha by his family). This scene is later repeated, word for word, in the last letter of the book, written to Jonathan by Alex's grandfather, describing a scene that 'actually' takes place between Alex and his father.

This scene and its repetition point to the performative potential of representation (that saying something can make it true), and shows the events of Alex's life (the most trustworthy narrative level) to be constructed, informed by Jonathan's writing. It dramatises the observation made in Jonathan's novel by the philosopher Pinchas T. that it is possible, "in theory, for life and art to be reversed" (Foer 2002: 11). It can also however, be seen to constitute a breach of the hierarchy of the narrative strands, collapsing the distinction between the fictionality of Alex's story and the truth of his letters to Jonathan, and reminding us that the *entire* novel is a fictional construct.

Although connections between Jonathan's novel, Alex's account of the trip and Alex's letters are drawn throughout the novel, the most pointed instance of this type of breach happens from within the *Book of Antecedents*, whose entries are interrupted by the words "We are writing...", which are repeated over the next page-and-a-half (*fig. 64*) (Foer 2002: 212), forming an abstract pattern that both holds the reader's attention at the level of the process of creation and, through the visual pattern it forms, reminds one forcibly of the materiality of the book and the page.

What is striking about these words is not only the repetition but Foer's use of the word "we". The unitary subject that creates meaning is replaced by a sense of collective authorship, which is elaborated on by Alex in the letter that immediately follows this section.

We are talking now, Jonathan, together, and not apart. We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it. Do you know that I am the Gypsy girl and you are Safran, and that I am the Kolker and you are Brod, and that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me? Do you not comprehend how we can bring each-other safety and peace? (Foer 2002: 214)

In this way, Foer again breaches the distance between the different narratives, pointing to the way that both Alex and Jonathan are his own creations, suggesting not only that they are “the same” but that his own writing is a type of negotiation of two types of writing: a reconciliation, as well as a critical dialogue, between a realism that emphasises trust and ‘truth’, and a metafictional drive that refuses to let this realism remain naive.

## **5.5. CONCLUSION**

*Everything is Illuminated* thus makes extensive use of postmodern literary reflexive devices associated with metafiction. It not only foregrounds, but also dramatises, the process that led to its creation. It returns to a “realistic” mode which is engaged with communal, historical events, while sustaining an explicit commentary on the way that both the literary text *and* the world that it claims to represent are constructed.

Foer’s use of metafictional reflexive strategies does not conform to the search for an origin that I have argued often accompanies the problematisation of referentiality and the self-consciousness of literary and artistic modernism. Foer’s novel may seek to give artistic or formal shape to an otherwise uncontainable or unrepresentable reality, but it also turns back to ask questions about its own reflexive mode of representation. Its evocation of the reciprocal flow between art and life works to re-establish faith in the creative power of the imagination, and the fact that, as Alex puts it, “in writing we get second chances” (Foer 2002: 144).

## CONCLUSION

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As this thesis has demonstrated, reflexivity in the work of both modern and postmodern artists/authors involves a renegotiation of the relationship between the artist/author, form, and the world/reality.

In van Gogh's paintings and drawings, form is liberated from its inherited imperative to image external reality objectively and is re-employed in the expression of an internal, subjective reality. His specifically modern mode of reflexivity is constituted by an emphasis on the medium that draws attention to its status as painting and a turning back of the subject to examine itself. This is linked to a search for truth and self-knowledge, which recuperates the idea of the centre at the level of a psychological or "artistic" truth, grounded in the model of the self-expressing its personality directly through the medium. This recuperation is also unsettled by an underlying sense of the multiplicity and fragmentation of that self, lending his portraits their particular poignancy.

In the writing of Virginia Woolf, the inadequacy of form to the world becomes a major focus, and the fragility of the artistic self is explored in depth and treated with sympathy, though with a certain ironic distance. The search for meaning through art is undertaken in her writing with a seriousness and urgency that is in fact *fuelled* by a loss of faith in the ability of language to express meaning. Reflexivity in her work, both formal and thematic, gestures towards the task of problematising, and thus renewing, the ability of the artist to image reality and create meaning.

The art of Anselm Kiefer is explicitly and systematically reflexive, turning back to question the modernist concern with formal purity through an intertextual and interdisciplinary practise that extends the textuality of the artwork into the world, and re-investigates the role of both art and the artist. Kiefer's particularly postmodern reflexive strategies ultimately work to reaffirm the ability of art to create meaning and engage with the historical world.

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel dramatises this play between the realist desire to engage with the world and the reflexive drive to call attention to the role of the form as mediating this engagement. His humorous, whimsical metafictional strategies play off against a commitment to 'faithfulness', grounding postmodernism's flirtatious flaunting of its own fictitiousness in an art that is socially committed and reaffirms the power of the imagination while refusing to be naive.

An investigation of these texts points to the way that modern and postmodern reflexivity can thus be seen as inextricably linked, producing a vital tension that continually enlivens and reactivates both.

### **MY OWN WORK: Fragments for Revision (working title).**

This thesis was conceived as a process of investigation that runs parallel to my own creative practice. As already stated, my interest in reflexivity arose out of my practical work as an undergraduate, particularly from a fascination and frustration with descriptive painting, as well as from the theoretical side of the course, and the paintings and novels I have taken as examples have all fed into my own work, some directly and others more obliquely. However, it has been my aim for the theory and the practice to develop as independent, though related entities. Due to the restraints of creating a cogent academic argument, there are aspects of van Gogh's, Woolf's, Kiefer's and Foer's works which I identify with that are not directly related to the issues of reflexivity discussed in this thesis. Similarly, there are many frameworks that I could use as a basis for the discussion of my own work. In order to clarify the connection between my thesis and my practical work, however, I have stayed with the model developed in this thesis- looking at how both formal and thematic reflexivity in my own work relate to modern and postmodern reflexive modes.

For my Master's degree I have produced a body of work which consists of a series of paintings, sketches and writing. These areas of activity are distinct, but related. The paintings are centred around the depiction of a transitory domestic space. They take the description of external objects as their starting point, whereas the sketches play with the

language of ‘immediate’ or ‘intuitive’ expression. The writing is composed of sentences, phrases, and paragraphs pulled from longer pieces of journal writing. These three areas of activity play off against each other: the paintings start to function as sites for the projection of thoughts or feelings evoked by the writing and sketches.

However, the distinction between the paintings and sketches is not clear-cut. Many of the paintings combine fairly detailed illusion with more loosely suggested areas, giving the paintings something of an unfinished or preparatory air (see *fig. 65*). Some areas are left untreated, while others are erased, painted over or sanded down. There is a continuum between the more developed paintings and the looser ones that is intended to gesture towards a process of continual re-investigation, continual readjustment and revision- a process whose psychological dimensions are evoked by the written fragments (*fig. 66*). On the whole, the paintings are not intended as self-sufficient entities: instead they are meant to function more like words in a continually developing sentence, or like weights in a balance. The way that these works are painted, as well as the way in which they are juxtapositioned with seemingly more spontaneous, personal or subjective words and images, is intended to draw attention to the fact that they are loaded representations rather than neutral descriptions (see *fig. 67*). In this way, my work could be said to formally reflexive. For me, this formal reflexivity resonates with both the modernist and the postmodernist reflexive models that I have outlined. The way that the paint is applied in some areas has been informed by Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting, but the desire to contextualise these descriptions as moment within a ongoing process, and to contrast them with more humorous or silly moments, is something informed by postmodernism’s skepticism of final closure, and ultimate meaning.

Thematically, my work is reflexive in a number of ways. *Fig. 68* is a painting of an interior which features a framed van Gogh print and a television screen. In some senses, this painting reflects on the presence and the role of representation in an intimate, private space. This body of work is also an examination of my own living, working, and thinking space, and in this way the process that produced it could be called self-reflexive.



The way that I have come to understand the role of the artist is evident in a work such as *Let me help you*. The imagery in this picture was prompted by reading Elaine Showalter and Toril Moi's opposing views of Virginia Woolf, where Showalter argues that Woolf's aestheticism and her ideal of literary androgyny in fact negate her feminism, while Moi argues, as I have shown, that Woolf's textual practice is exactly where her deconstruction of phallo-centrism lies (Moi 1985: 38-51). While reading both sides of this debate, I found myself agreeing intellectually with Moi. However, something in Showalter's statement that Woolf had herself become the "Angel-of-the-house" and it was necessary to kill *her*, prompted me to make two works exploring this possibility. In the first painting, I am helping Woolf to put stones in her pocket so that she can drown. This action could also be interpreted as removing something from the pocket, perhaps stealing something, perhaps attempting to stop the suicide. In this work, I imagined myself as a smiling, impish character, a bit of an anarchist, killing off something that I identified with quite gleefully.

The second work is a drawing by the same title, depicting Virginia Woolf killing a wolf, accompanied by an account of an urban legend, that reads, "But there are other ways to kill a Woolf. You can coat a blade with blood. The wolf licks the blade until it cuts its own tongue, and then it drinks its own blood until it dies." In my mind, Woolf and the wolf represent two aspects of the self, which struggle together. For me, the text beneath is about the way that self-destruction is not always a measured action by an individual in control but is driven at times by an external cruelty.

Roland Barthes has commented that self-reflection can be a form of self-annihilation. (Barthes in Eakin 1992: 5). *Let me help you* is in part an exploration of a consciousness that turns back to examine itself, a theme echoed by fig. 67 (uppermost left). Looking back on this body of work, much of which is still in progress, self-examination emerges for me as strangely ambivalent: the incomplete, fragmented nature of the work is linked to a sense of abjection or failure, but also to a sense of on-going possibility. I experience both the subject matter (dead birds by dustbins, empty ovens (*fig. 69 and 70*) and the way that it is presented as somewhat abject, and yet presenting such subject matter is also

a form of celebration, and there is a strange cathartic ecstasy or delight in the undercurrent of violence and threat that underlies some of the work.

I understand my work as linking to a certain modernist form of reflexive in that it can be understood, like van Gogh's paintings of his bedroom and Woolf's depiction of her childhood holiday home, as an exploration of the resonances between the psychological undercurrents of daily existence and the places in which this existence is lived out. In that it attempts to press something of significance out of something mundane, and in that it is driven by a desire to understand experience and give it meaning, this body of work is linked to the modernist desire to give form to a chaotic world. However, the inclusion of absurd and potentially comic elements, and the lack of formal closure, are ways that I have attempted to give voice to a healthy and hopefully productive scepticism about this search for ultimate meaning and self-understanding.

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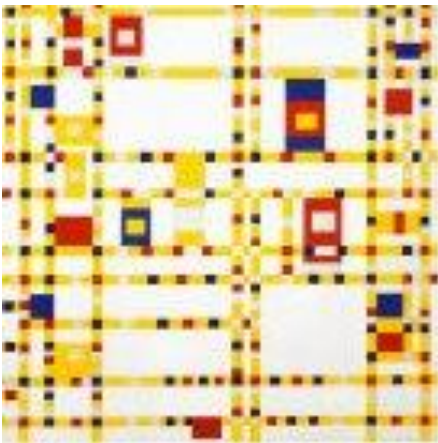
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64. Jonathan Safran Foer. *Everything is Illuminated*. 2002. Rpt United Kingdom: Penguin, 2003. pp. 212 & 213.
65. Rachel Collett. Paintings for *Fragments for Revision*. Oil on board. 700 x 570 cm each.
66. Rachel Collett. *Let me help you*. 2009. Oil on paper. 710 x 573 cm each.
67. Rachel Collett. Paintings for *Fragments for revision*. 2007-2009. Oil and paper on board. Dimensions variable (aprox. 700 x 570 cm each).
68. Rachel Collett. *Interior*. 2007. Oil on board. 750 x 570 cm.
69. Rachel Collett. *Untitled*. 2008-2209. Oil on board. 440 x 540 cm.
70. Rachel Collett. *Untitled*. (detail). 2008-2209. Oil on board. 700 x 570 cm.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

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1. Wassily Kandinsky. *Painting with Three Spots*. 1914. Oil on canvas. 120 x 111 cm. Collection Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain.



2. Piet Mondrian. *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. 1942-43. Oil on canvas. 127 x 127 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



3. Jackson Pollock. *Blue Poles: Number 11*. 1952. Enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas. 212.09 x 488.95 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Sydney.





4. Mark Rothko. *Red, Orange, Tan, and Purple*.  
1949. Oil on canvas. 214.5 x 174 cm.  
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5. Donald Judd. *Untitled*.  
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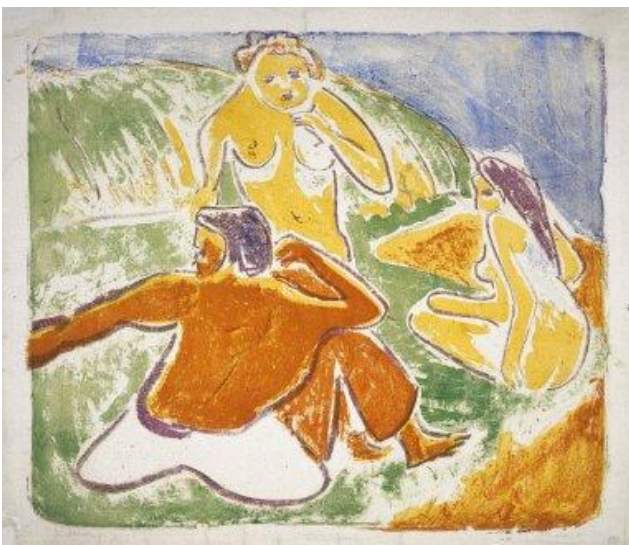
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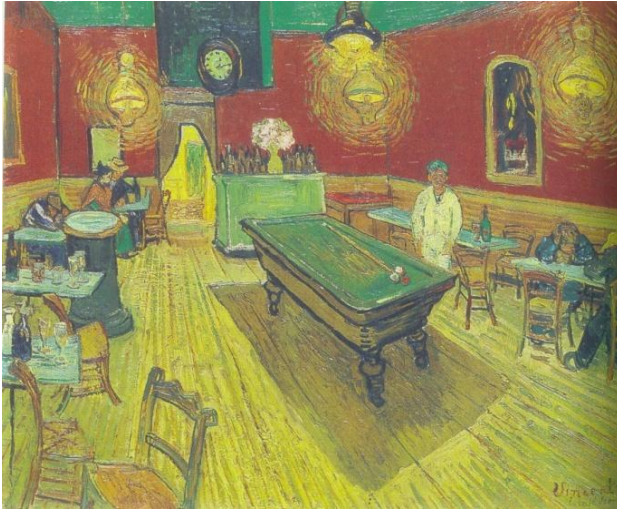
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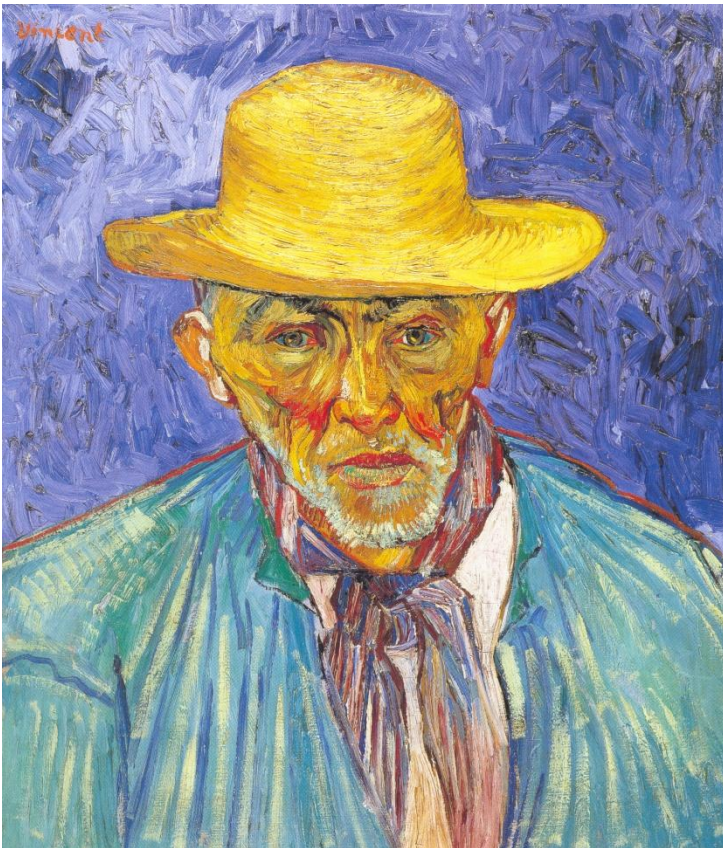
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21. Photograph A.I.v.G.  
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22. Artist Unknown. *Christ Pantocrator*.  
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Dimensions unavailable.

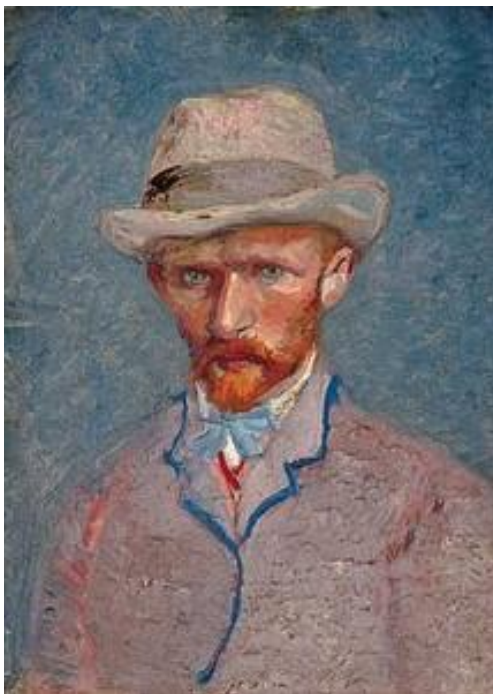


23. Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait with Felt Hat* (detail).  
1887-88. Oil on canvas. 44 x 37.5 cm.  
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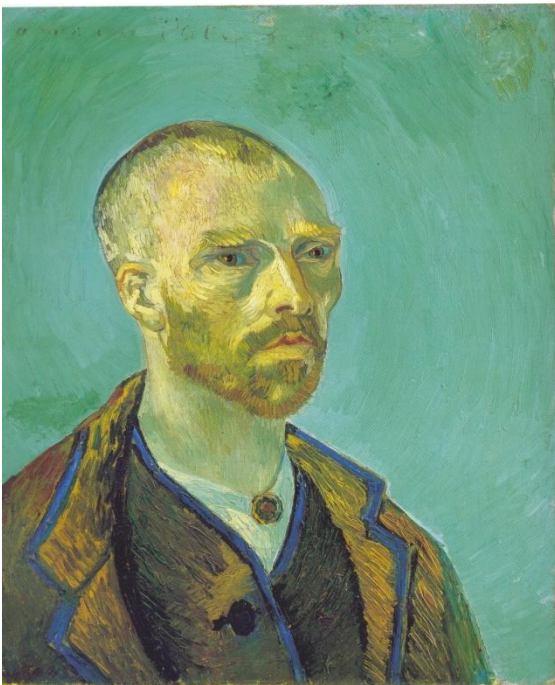
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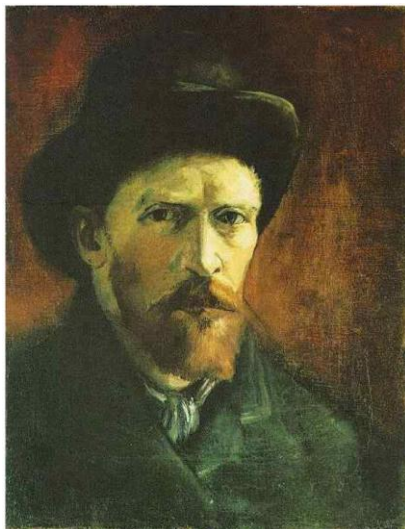
26. Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait as a Painter*.  
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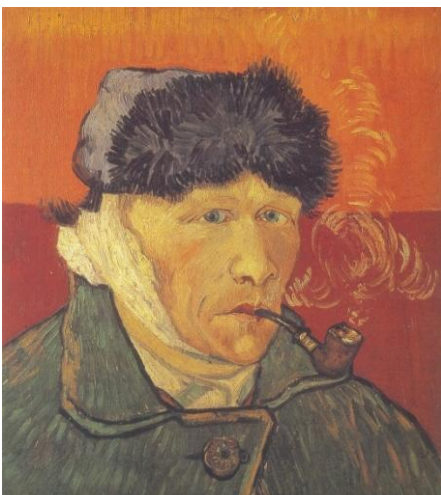
27. Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait as Bonze*.  
1888. Oil on canvas. 62 x 52 cm.  
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art  
Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



28. Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait*.  
1887. Oil on canvas. 42 x 30 cm.  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



29. Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait with a Dark Felt Hat*.  
1886. Oil on canvas. 41.5 x 32.5 cm.  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



30. Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*.  
1889. Oil on canvas. 51 x 45 cm.  
Stavros S Niarchos Collection, Athens.

1. Anselm Kiefer, biography, 1976. Translated from Bonn, Kunstverein, <i>Anselm Kiefer</i> (March 17–April 17).	March 8, 1945 Born in Donaueschingen	Haute couture	Watercolors
	Grandmother	Le Corbusier (La Tourette)	1973 Boulder-rock
	Ruins	Art studies under Peter Dreher, Freiburg	Baselitz
	Black forests	1969 Art studies under Horst Antes, Karlsruhe	Nibelung
	1951 Moved to his parents' in Ottersdorf	Motorcycle	Parsifal
	Primary school	Marble	Michael Werner
	Heaven-bell	Jean Genet	1974 Works of the scorched earth
	Rhine	Huysmans	Heliogabalus
	Lowland forest	Ludwig II of Bavaria	Johnny
	Border	Paestum	Stefan George
	1956 Secondary school in Rastatt	Adolf Hitler	Norwegian light
	Rilke	Julia	Hans Henny Jabn
	Rodin	Paintings: Heroic landscapes	Sick art
	1963 Jean Walter Prize (travel grant to visit France)	1970 Created books on heroic allegories, occupations, holes in the sky	1975 Thirty years old
	Van Gogh	State examinations, won scholarship from Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes	How to Paint
	Holland	Study with Joseph Beuys, Düsseldorf	Created books: Cauterization, Sinking, Becoming Wood, Becoming Sand
	France	Paintings on Trinity Quaternity, above-below, I-Thou	Mushrooms
	1965 Qualifying examination	1971 Marriage to Julia	Daughter Sarah
	Italy	Oden Forest	1976 Siegfried Forgets Brunbilde
	Sweden	Wood	Maria
	Study of law and French	Grain	The essential is not yet done
	Freiburg	Richard Wagner	
	1966 Paris	Son Daniel	
		Winter spring summer fall	

31. Anselm Kiefer. *Autobiography*. 1976.  
 Translated from Bonn, Kunstverein, *Anselm Kiefer*. 1977.  
 Available from: Rosenthal, M. 1987. *Anselm Kiefer*.  
 Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Museum of Art, p.11.





32. Anselm Kiefer. *Virginia Woolf*.  
 1975. Watercolour, gouche, and graphite pencil on paper. A: 35.6 x 47.6 cm.  
 Inscribed lower right in watercolour "für Julia" [for Julia]. B: 29.8 x 41.9 cm.  
 Inscribed bottom centre in watercolour "Virginia Woolf. P  
 urchase Lila Ancheson Wallace Gift.



33. Diego Velasquez. 1656.  
Oil on canvas. 318 x 276 cm.  
Museo del Prado.



34. Gustave Courbet. *The Painter's Studio*.  
1855. Oil on canvas. 361 x 598.  
The Louvre, Paris.



35. Johannes Vermeer. *Allegory of Painting (The Painter in His Studio)*.  
1666. Oil on canvas. 130 x 110 cm.  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

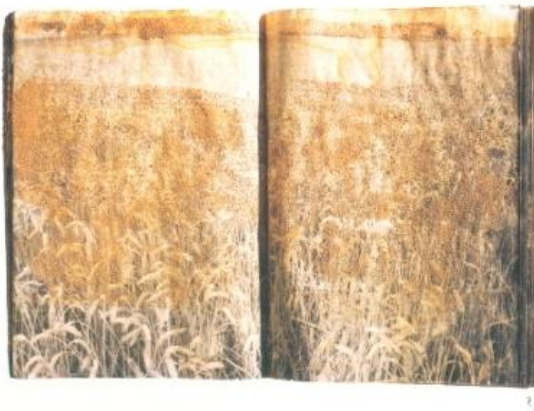


36. Anselm Kiefer. *Painting = Burning*.  
1974. Oil on burlap. 220 x 300cm.  
Collection of Jerry and Emily Spiegel, Kings Point, New York.





37. Vincent van Gogh. *Wheat-fields under a Stormy Sky*.  
1890. Oil on canvas. 50 x 100cm.  
Vincent van Gogh Foundation.



38. Anselm Kiefer. *March Sand V.(detail)*.  
1977. Twenty-five double-page  
photographic images, with sand, oil, and  
glue, mounted on cardboard and bound.  
62 x 42 x 8.5 cm. (bound volume).  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Saul,



39. Sigmar Polke. *This is how you sit correctly (after Goya)*.  
1982. Acrylic on fabric. 200 x 190 cm.  
Private collection, Baden-Baden.



40. Pat Steirs. *The Breugel Series: A Vantias of Styles*.  
1982-84. Oil on canvas.  
The Kunstmuseum, Bern.





41. Anselm Kiefer. *Nuremberg*.  
1982. Acrylic, emulsion and straw on canvas. 280 x 380cm.  
Collection of Eli and Edythe L. Broad, Los Angeles.



42. Anselm Kiefer. *To Paint*.  
1974. Oil and shellac on burlap. 118 x 254 cm.  
Family H. de Groot Collection, Groningen, The Netherlands.



43. Anselm Kiefer. *Engel*.  
1977. Oil, acrylic, emulsion and  
shellac on canvas. 130 x 170 cm.  
Peier Bonner Collection,  
Stockholm.



44. Anselm Kiefer. *Engel*.  
1977. Oil, acrylic, emulsion and  
shellac on canvas. 130 x 170 cm.  
Peier Bonner Collection,  
Stockholm.



45. Anselm Kiefer *Faith, Hope, Love*.  
1976. Watercolour and charcoal on paper.  
93 x 62 cm. Private Collection.





46. Anselm Kiefer. *Palette with Wings*.  
1985. Lead, steel and tin. Approx. 280- x 350 x 100 cm.  
Private Collection.



47. Anselm Kiefer. *Palette with Wings*.  
1985. Lead, steel and tin. Approx. 280- x 350 x 100 cm.  
Private Collection.



48. Anselm Kiefer *Palette on a Rope*.  
1977. Oil, emulsion, and shellac on canvas. 130 x 160 cm.  
Private Collection.



49. Anselm Kiefer. *Migard. 1*  
1980-1985. Oil, acrylic, emulsion and shellac on photograph, mounted on canvas (in three parts). 360 x 604 cm.  
The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.





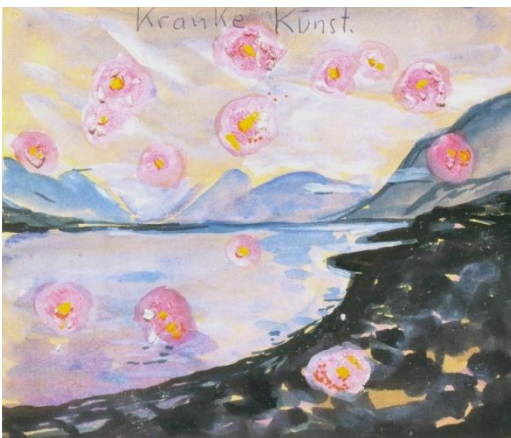
50. Anselm Kiefer. *Iconoclastic Controversy*.

1980. Oil, emulsion, shellac, and sand on photograph, mounted on canvas, with woodcut. 290 x 400 cm. Museum Boymans- van Beunings, Rotterdam.



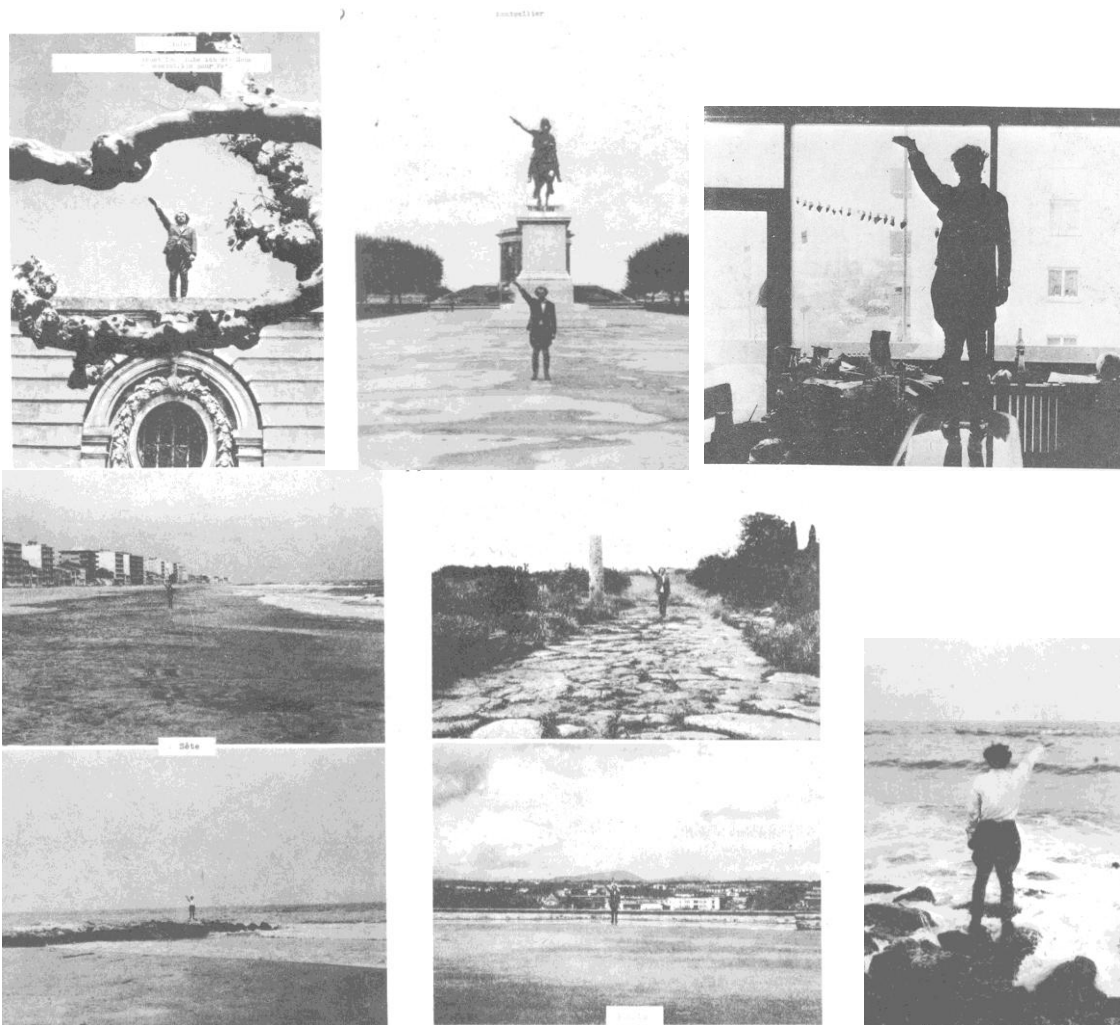
51. Anselm Kiefer. *Icarus- March Sand*.

1981. Oil, shellac, and sand on photograph, mounted on canvas. 290 x 360 cm. Saatchi Collection, London.

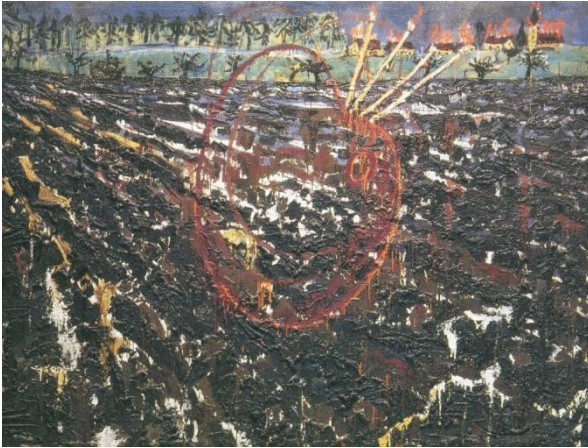


52. Anselm Kiefer. *Sick Art*.

1974. Watercolour on paper. 19.5 x 24 cm. Collection of Howard and Linda. Karshan, London.



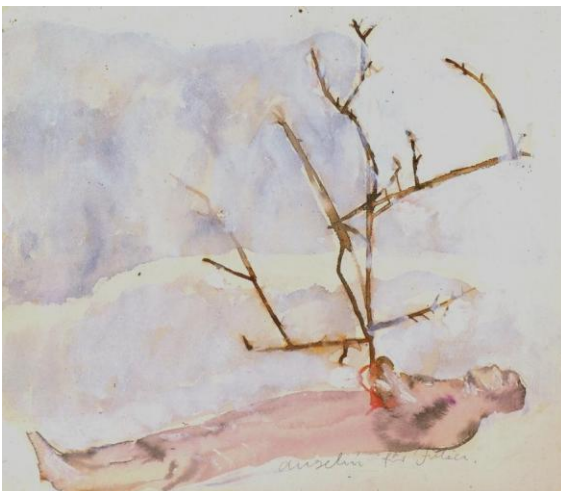
53. Anselm Kiefer. Pages from *Occupations*.  
 From *Interfunktionen*, no.12 (1975).  
 1969. Available from: Rosenthal, M. 1987.  
*Anselm Kiefer*. Philadelphia: The Philadelphia  
 Museum of Art, p.15.



54. Anselm Kiefer. *Nero Paints*. 1974.  
Oil on canvas. 220 x 300 cm.  
Staatsgalerie Moderner Kunst,  
Munich.



55. Casper David Freidrich. *Wanderer above the Misty Sea*.  
1818. Oil on canvas. 94.8 x 74.8 cm.  
Kunsthalle, Hamburg.



56. Anselm Kiefer. *Reclining Man with Branch*.  
1971. Watercolour on paper. 24 x 28 cm.  
Private Collection





57. Anselm Kiefer. *Man in the Forest*.  
1971. Oil on muslin. 174 x 189 cm.  
Private Collection.



58. Anselm Kiefer. *Sol Invictus (Invisible Sun)*.  
1995. Woodcut, acrylic and sunflowers seeds on  
canvas. 500 x 190 cm.





59. Anselm Kiefer. *Iconoclastic Controversy*. 1980. Oil, emulsion, shellac, and sand on photograph, mounted on canvas, with woodcut. 290 x 400 cm. Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam.



60. Pablo Picasso. *Still-Life with Chair Caning*. 1912. Oil, oilcloth and paper on canvas with rope surround. 27 x 34.9 cm. Musée Picasso, Paris.

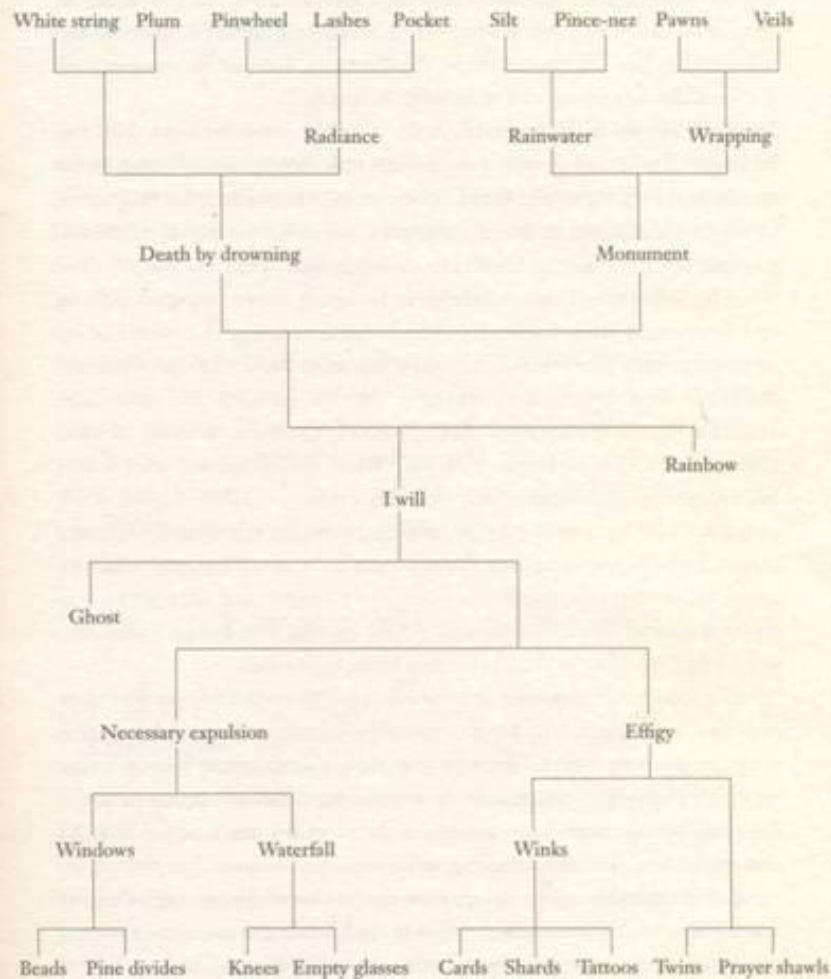


61. Anselm Kiefer. *Untitled*. 1980-86. Oil, acrylic, emulsion, shellac, and charcoal on photograph, mounted on canvas (in three parts), with lead and steel. 330 x 555cm. Collection of Gerald S. Elliott, Chicago.



62. Anselm Kiefer. *You're a Painter*.  
1969. Bound book. 25 x 19 x 1 cm.  
Private Collection.

Men set up flow charts (which were themselves memories of family trees) in an attempt to make sense of their memories. They tried to follow the line back, like Theseus out of the labyrinth, but only went in deeper, farther.



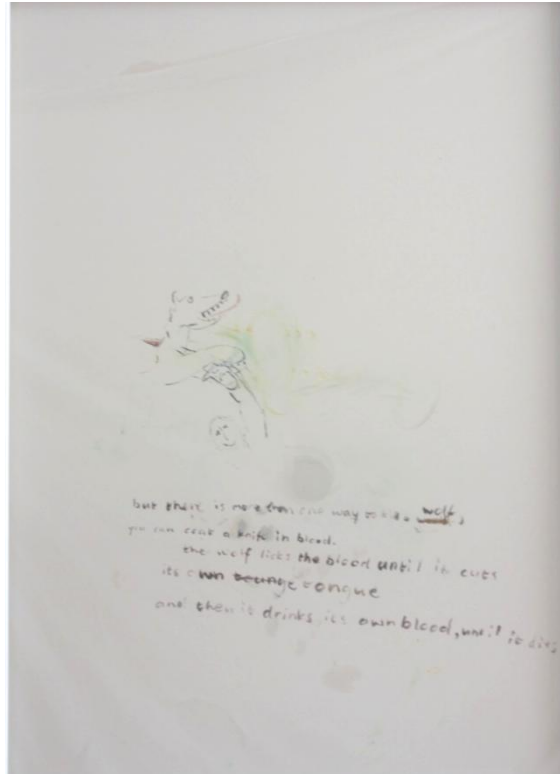
63. Jonathan Safran Foer. *Everything is Illuminated*.  
2002. Rpt United Kingdom: Penguin, 2003. p 259. Flow Chart.



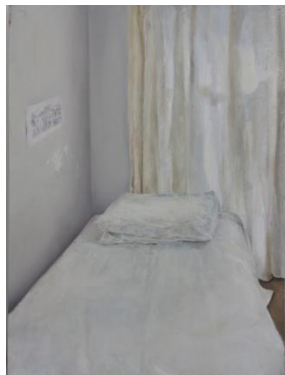
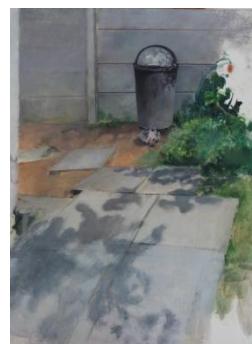
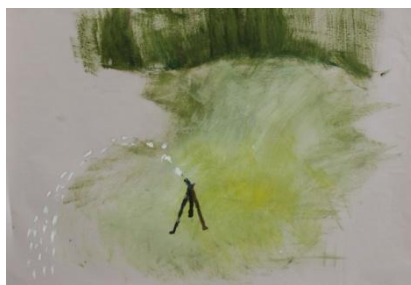




65. Rachel Collett. Paintings for *Fragments for Revision*.  
Oil on board. 700 x 570 cm each.



66. Rachel Collett. *Let me help you*.  
2009. Oil on paper. 710 x 573 cm each.



67. Rachel Collett. Paintings for *Fragments for revision*.  
2007-2009. Oil and paper on board. Dimensions variable (aprox. 700 x 570 cm each).





68. Rachel Collett. *Interior*.  
2007. Oil on board. 750 x 570 cm



69. Rachel Collett. *Oven*.  
2008-2209. Oil on board. 440 x 540 cm.



70. Rachel Collett. *Sunlight in the Garden*.  
(detail).  
2008-2209. Oil on board. 700 x 570 cm.



